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# **EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES REGARDING EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE ISSUES IN A CAPE TOWN TOWNSHIP PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**BY**

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## **Declaration**

This work has not been previously published for any degree. Each contribution to, and quotation in, this thesis from the work(s) of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the teaching practices and ideas about language and teaching that Foundation Phase educators hold as regard literacy and language issues, and the effect of these ideas and practices on children's learning. An ethnographic-style case study approach was used to examine classroom-based literacy and language practices. Qualitative classroom-based data indicated a disjuncture between educators' conceptualisations about early learning and their literacy teaching practices and that the teaching practices that were evident did not facilitate successful learning on the part of the learners despite the availability and use of isiXhosa as a medium of instruction. Instead, classroom literacy lessons were limited to rote learning and memorisation, which resulted in learners being passive recipients of literacy knowledge. The study concludes that home language instruction does not of itself guarantee academic success, as learners struggle to learn when are not given the freedom to participate in classroom activities and to become active learners, despite being taught in their home language. The restrictions on learner agency were particularly evident in the English-medium class where non-isiXhosa speaking educators had no linguistic resources that they shared with the Xhosa-speaking educators and faced challenges of teaching English to learners who had little English. A localised version of English as well as isiXhosa was prevalent in these classes and was used to facilitate instruction. The thesis argued that the continuing use of these linguistic resources could be inadequate for learner's development in standard English for test purposes. The study therefore argues that early literacy and language learning are importance tools for academic and cognitive development and points to a need for language development especially in early literacy classrooms. It also points to the importance of enhanced teacher education in South Africa, especially in under resourced schools where educators experience difficulties in applying the education curriculum in their classes.

**This thesis is dedicated to my two children, Khanyisile and Sandile Xhalisa, my late twin brother, Thabo Xhalisa, my late older brother, Simphiwe Xhalisa, my late older sister, Thandi Xhalisa, and to my late mother, who gave me the love of proverbs and oral tales.**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

In the last fifteen (or so years), South African educators have faced extensive changes to the education system. The Department of Education (DoE) has successfully produced many policy (including curricula) documents, but has been less successful in implementing them. In a quest to improve literacy rates, the South African government commissioned the design of a multilingual policy and a literacy curriculum for the Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3) that recognise home language instruction and early literacy as integral components for effective teaching and learning (DoE, 1997). The policy was also designed with the purpose of rectifying the skewed precepts of apartheid education. However, despite these amendments, classroom studies of early literacy education in South Africa (Bloch, 2000, 2005; Desai, 1999; Gough & Bock, 2001; Kanjee and Prinsloo, 2005; Mati, 2002; Setati and Adler, 2000), continued to highlight problems with poor reading, writing and numeracy abilities amongst learners in township and rural schools. Mati (2002), Setati and Adler (2000) attribute this enduring problem to Black and working class learners' linguistic incompetency in English, and the ill-advised over-use of English in instruction in Foundation Phase classes. For Mati and Setati the status and use of English has detrimental effects on children's learning abilities as these children encounter English only in classroom contexts: it is not a language spoken in their homes. This study sets out to examine, by way of a case study approach in one school, whether the poor school performances of early primary school learners stem from language-related problems, or is a result of ineffective instruction at

foundational levels, or of a combination of factors relating to language use and teaching practices. Because Grade One is the formal start of the Foundation Phase level, it is important that learners acquire a firm foundation in literacy skills as well as in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). However, what remains under-studied is how the ideas that educators hold about early literacy and language teaching affect children's learning in these settings.

Attention to aspects of school failures in primary schooling in South Africa has been drawn in recent studies. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006 assessment was an international comparative study of reading literacy of primary school learners, where South African Grades 4 and 5 were graded the lowest in the 39 participating countries (Howie et al., 2007). Fleisch (2008) also reported findings of standardised literacy tests (across the country) where the studies revealed the poor performance of Foundation Phase learners in reading and writing activities. He suggested that part of the problem was that educators' pedagogical practices were widely characterised by skill and drill practices that were not producing appropriate learning. Brock-Utne (2007) and Mafela (2010) similarly attributed the poor performance of Foundation Phase learners to teaching approaches that do not facilitate learning. Du Plessis et al. (2000: 21) blamed this problem on limited teaching and learning resources that impeded early literacy and language development in early literacy classrooms. In order to shed further light on these concerns, this study sets out to answer the following research question:

- How do the assumptions, values, ideas and commitments that educators hold regarding children's early literacy learning as well as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) to be used in classrooms manifest in classroom practices and what kinds of implications do these have for children's learning?

For the purposes of this research, the following sub-questions were developed in order to answer the research question:

- a) What kind of language and literacy teaching approaches do educators employ in their Grade One classrooms and how do these practices influence children's learning?
- b) What teaching and learning resources are available in the Foundation Phase classrooms to support the cognitive and literacy skills required for academic development?
- c) How effective is home language instruction in facilitating instruction in Foundation Phase classes and what kind of mix of linguistic resources is found in classroom exchanges with what kinds of consequences for learner comprehensions and learning?
- d) How effective is 'second language' (L2) medium instruction in the facilitation of learning and instruction in the Foundation Phase?

To answer these questions, I conducted a classroom-based study in two Grade One classrooms and one Grade Three classroom at one school. The Foundation Phase was the

primary focus because that is the formal start of academic life and where children acquire a foundation in school-appropriate language and literacy skills (Clay 1993:15). In addition, laquinta (2006: 413) argues that the early years are the focus for the prevention of reading difficulties. In fact, research conducted over the past two decades has produced extensive results demonstrating that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up.

## **1.2 OVERVIEW**

Chapter 1 draws on secondary sources to construct an historical overview to South Africa's pre-democracy educational system and the impact it has on the current one. This is followed by a review of the research goals and reason for conducting a research study of this nature. Accordingly, the problem statement as well as the significance of the study is elaborated in detail. Chapter 2 gives an outline and review of the relevant literature to do with early literacy development and language learning theories. The theoretical resources developed here draw from, firstly, New Literacy Studies (NLS) research and Emergent Literacy studies and, secondly, from studies of bilingualism in teaching and learning. In Chapter 3 the methodology that shaped the study, the research methods followed, the data collection procedures and their rationale are presented in detail. The analysis of the data is presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of the conclusions of the study and offers recommendations that might pave the way for future studies in South Africa.

### 1.3 RESEARCH GOALS

Research studies (Stanovich, 1986; Heath, 1983; Teale, 1996; Dickinson, 2009) have constantly documented the claim that reading is integral to children's academic success and that children who are fluent readers of certain kinds and able to read school texts with understanding stand a very good chance of succeeding in other subject areas as they progress through schooling. Research in township and rural schools in South Africa (Plüddeman, 2000; Cranfield et al., 2005) have highlighted difficulties among working class Black learners, indicating that these children are trailing behind their White and Coloured counterparts and possess poor literacy skills that do not prepare them for academic success.

In light of the above, Cooper and McIntyre (1996: 1) have recommended that “any serious attempt to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning must start from an understanding of what people in the classroom do at present”. This study therefore attempts to examine the factors that influence early literacy learning, with a particular focus on the practices Foundation Phase educators employ in their classrooms to facilitate instruction. It intends to foreground the perceptions and assumptions that early literacy educators hold about early literacy instruction and learning, and to examine how these produce particular outcomes in class, with regard to literacy learning and the language resources used for such learning.

#### **1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

With the post-apartheid South African government's aim of improving literacy and numeracy rates in South Africa, research (Bloch, 2005; Stein, 2000) shows that learners enrolled in township and rural schools continue to perform badly in literacy and numeracy subjects despite the unveiling of a new curriculum that emphasises that instruction should take place in learners' home language. In terms of the dynamics of teaching and learning approaches, one can assume that learners will fare badly in literacy activities if the teaching approaches do not encourage learners to participate appropriately in ways that help them to acquire foundations for further learning. What should also be noted is that most learners from working class backgrounds come from homes where parents probably do not or cannot spend much time with them, orienting them towards reading and writing activities (Mafela, 2010). My focus here, though, will be on the classroom, rather than home practices.

#### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

Strickland (2009) maintains that language and literacy influence and depend on each other. This study therefore sought to examine educators' literacy and language ideas and the impact these practices had on children's learning when translated into practice. In their analysis of classroom discourse in Black schools in the Western Cape, Gough and Bock (2001) argue that in Cape Town the classroom instruction in both isiXhosa and English that the learners were exposed to was not stimulating and did not prepare them for academic discourse. Khoali (2006) reported this view and argued that the poor performance of Black learners was evident in the national examination and that these learners continue to

perform poorly as compared with learners enrolled in English and Afrikaans-medium schools. The root of this problem could be that educators are using teaching approaches that do not facilitate learning.

Many researchers have tended to focus their attention on the influence of second language teaching on early literacy learning, arguing that home language instruction enhances academic success. The study looks at the influence language issues, in general, and literacy learning, in particular, have on children's learning through examining the approaches employed by the educators in their classrooms to facilitate learning and instruction.

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## **CHAPTER 2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The theoretical orientation of this research study is towards a sociocultural view of language, literacy and learning. It draws on work within the New Literacy Studies (NLS) as well as from discourse analysis theory, as these theoretical resources move one's focus away from the view of literacy as simply a basic skill and of readers and writers as generalised subjects without any social location. The sociocultural model of literacy is an important resource for the study of literacy in education as it facilitates the understanding of the educational literacy issues that cannot be tackled appropriately within the view, which tends to view reading and writing as isolated activities based on "inner" or "abstracted skills and processes" (Lankshear, 1999: 12). These issues include that of learners "who demonstrate competence in social practices and their embedded literacies, yet fail to come to terms with school literacy". Within the South African context, researchers using NLS resources have provided valuable understandings on early literacy practices in South African homes and schools (Prinsloo and Bloch, 1999; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Prinsloo, 2005; Stein, 2008; Stein & Mamabolo, 2005), but such work is the exception and the field remains undeveloped in South Africa. This work (see also Bloch, 2000; 2005; Prinsloo & Stein, 2004) draws attention to children's out-of-school literacy practices that are different from those of the school and the mismatch between the resources that children bring to school and the ways that educators engage with literacy and language in the classroom. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first instance, I present a brief summary of aspects of apartheid education and its influences on contemporary early literacy education. Secondly, a



review of NLS theory and its relevance to this current study and to the policy framework will follow. Finally, drawing from work in interactive sociolinguistics, I will elaborate on the concept of ‘code-meshing’ (Michael-Luna and Canagarajah, 2008) in relation to classroom bilingualism.

## **2.2 SOCIAL CONTEXT**

### **2.2.1 Apartheid education**

After the 1994 democratic elections, the South African government developed a new schooling system, with the intention, amongst other concerns, of improving literacy levels and redressing the inequities produced by the apartheid educational system. Despite these intentions, however, the damaging effects of the apartheid educational system (Jones, 1993, Kallaway, 2002) continue to be seen in the form of great inequalities between elite and sub-elite schools in South Africa. Muthivhi and Broom (2008) argues that the apartheid system had a negative impact on the lives of black children in South Africa in that it was devastating and its influence is still apparent in the large disparities between middle-class and working class schooling in South Africa.

Prior to 1994 it was difficult for Black (including Coloured) schools to acquire a quality education under the apartheid system that existed from the 1950s to the 1990s (Hartshone, 1992; Kallaway, 2002). The South African schooling system was positioned along racial lines and characterised by an unequal distribution of state resources. This placed Black and Coloured schools at a disadvantage (Soudien, 2007). The effects of the system of racially

segregated education included the effect that public libraries, reading, and learning schemes were retained for White, and particularly White-Afrikaner, schoolchildren, and this deprived Coloured and (especially) Black learners with reading opportunities that could have fostered their successful literacy and language development (Muthivhi and Broom, 2008).

Nkabinde (1997) argues that the dire shortage of teaching materials, the lack of libraries and poor infrastructure and the shortage of books written in African languages, all deprived Black communities of access to everyday, print-literacy activities, exposure to which are probably optimal for successful, initial early literacy development and also for success with early school literacy. This lack of teaching, reading and learning resources, a carry-over from apartheid education, unfortunately, endures in the current schooling system.

### **2.2.2 New curriculum changes: the language policy**

In an effort to transform education, the newly democratically elected government commissioned the design of a multilingual Language in Education Policy (LiEP) to meet the language and educational needs of South African children. This policy was aimed at promoting equitable education and language rights for all South African children. The latest Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE: RNCS, 2010: 3) also stipulates that its aim is to ensure “that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of our population”. The LiEP grants official recognition to nine African languages as well as English and Afrikaans. The South African DoE adopted an additive bilingual approach. Additive bilingualism acknowledges the

use of the home and dominant language in classroom contexts as media of teaching and learning. Research has confirmed that proficiency in the second language as well as effective literacy acquisition depends on a good knowledge of the first language or home language (Cummins, 1984; Skuttnab-Kangas, 1988). The LiEP allows for the introduction of L2 (a second language). For the most part this means the introduction of English, but the LiEP also calls for the continuing use of the home language in schools, along additive bilingualism lines. For example, *The Revised Curriculum 2005* (C2005), suggests that “the learner’s home language ... be used for learning and teaching wherever possible” which is in line with the LiEP (DoE, 2002:5).

### **2.2.3 The Revised Curriculum 2005 (C2005)**

In 1998, the LiEP was followed by a new curriculum framework – Outcomes Based Education (OBE), alternatively referred to as C2005 (DoE, 1998), driven by progressive educational values such as active learner participation, learner-centredness, critical thinking and educator as a facilitator rather than as a dispenser of knowledge (DoE, 1997: RNCS, Grade R - 9). While receiving extensive criticism (see Jansen and Christie, 1999), the aim of the curriculum was to move away from a teacher/content-based approach to a curriculum and pedagogy which aspired to integrate learners into the teaching process, in contrast with the pre-1994 apartheid educational policy, which emphasised teacher-centred approaches as well as rote learning, memorisation and skills and drills methods (Hartshone, 1992). The revised curriculum aimed to equip learners with critical and analytical thinking skills required for academic success. In addition,

It seeks to create a lifelong learner, who is confident and independent, literate, numerate and multi-skilled, compassionate, with respect for the environment and the ability to participate in society as a critical and active citizen (DoE, 2002: 8).

While the progressive intentions of the curriculum revisions were laudable, researchers (Jansen & Christie, 1999; Bloch, 2005; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004; Prinsloo, 2005) claimed that there was still a disjuncture between theory and practice in Foundation Phase and secondary school classes and that the values of the pre-1994 educational policy continue to prevail in Foundation Phase classes, despite the provision, in terms of policy, for children's home languages as media of instruction. The distance between policy prescription and teacher engagement with these policy intentions remained a problem. Jansen and Christie (1999: 9) pointed out that C2005 was packed with "more than a hundred new words" that created confusion for many South African educators, including those who already had productive teaching strategies but did not know how they fitted the new curriculum order (Chisholm et al., 2000; Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999). In addition, Prinsloo and Stein (2004) and Muthivhi and Broom (2008) observed that the teaching of early literacy learning in township schools relied widely on restricted skill and drill routines that were in contrast with the interactive and constructivist principles set out in C2005. Prinsloo and Stein (2004: 7) found that educators in a Khayelitsha pre-school developed their own teaching approaches, "characterised by collective rote-and-chant-learning" practices that were not in line with the values stipulated in C2005.

In her review of the apartheid education policy, Motala (2001: 63) observed that curriculum documents tended to place heavy emphasis on “form and structure ... rather than pedagogy and the actual processes of teaching and learning” and were designed on the basis of misconceived perceptions “about actual practice and implementation in schools” (2001: 65). Although her argument focused on pre-1994 educational policy, the same observations apply to C2005, which fails to stipulate how educators should teach.

#### **2.2.4 The position of English in South African education**

In response to criticism of existing language policy in curriculum statements, the current Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, presented the final draft in March 2010 of the new RNCS language policy, which prescribes the use of English as the First Additional LOLT in the Foundation Phase (Grades One to Three). The Minister emphasised that English will not replace the home language (which is already a LoLT in the Foundation Phase) but that it was important for Foundation Phase learners to engage meaningfully and practically in English since it is a global language. Prior to this, English and Afrikaans-speaking children were the only ones who benefited from the 1997 language policy which emphasised mother tongue education, as they were taught exclusively in their home languages throughout all the years of school, while Black children were required to be instructed through their home language from Grades One to Three (Mati, 2002) and then faced a sudden transition to English. I will return to these questions of languages of instruction but first go on to review approaches to literacy learning that provide an alternative perspective on children’s early language and literacy development.

### **2.3 Sociocultural approach to literacy**

I examine here an approach that views literacy from the perspective of social practices theory. Critical of behaviourist and cognitivist approaches to the study of literacy, because of their narrow view of literacy as a neutral skill that is learned in educational contexts, researchers (Heath, 1983; Street, 1983, 2005; Gee, 1996, 2000; Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; 2000; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) took an interest in the social and cultural nature of literacy learning and teaching. This 'social turn' in the study of literacy views literacy, language, thought and learning as active and socially variable processes, ones that are produced by social and cultural participation (Gee, 1999; Wells; 1999). Earlier researchers and educationist thought of literacy as simply "a psychologically ability – something true to do with our heads" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:1) and as a passport to upward mobility. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach argues, instead, that language and literacy are social practices and that social, cultural and school practices (incorporating words and texts) are variable and locally meaningful ways of doing things. While "there is no practice without meaning, just as there as is no meaning without practice" (Lankshear, 1999: 11), such meanings are produced by socially situated actors, whose meanings are shaped by the wider social practices that make their actions meaningful.

The NLS is produced by the work of a range of researchers within the fields of cultural anthropology, psychology and applied linguistics (e.g., Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) who examined how people used literacy in everyday and educational contexts. As described by Street (1995: 1),

the NLS offers a “broader consideration of literacy as a social practice and in a cross-cultural perspective”. Unlike the commonly held view of literacy, which presents it as a set of transferable and de-contextualised reading, and writing skills obtained only in educational settings, the NLS approach is an “integrated-social-cultural-political-historical” perspective (Gee, 1996: 122). This suggests that reading and writing practices are culturally variable and are deeply implicated in ideological values and in dominant discourses. The NLS stands in contrast to a widely held view of literacy referred to by Brian Street (1984) as the “autonomous” model of literacy. Within the autonomous or psycholinguistic model (see Goody, 1969 and Ong, 1982), literacy is conceptualised as a set of uniform and value-free skills disconnected from any historical and social contexts as well as the cultural practices within which it is embedded (Rockhill, 1987: 156). This view treats literacy, autonomously, as a panacea for the social ills of a society in that, it is seen to scaffold socio-economic development and improve the personal and cognitive development of poor people, intensifying their chances of getting employment despite the unequal political, social and economic conditions that led to their current socio-economic situation (Street, 2005).

In terms of school literacy, the autonomous model of literacy views literacy (reading and writing) as simply a mental and neurological processes (Tracey and Morrow, 2006; Tompkins, 2010), referring to the translation of “graphic symbols [such as letters] on a printed page into an oral code [sounds corresponding to those letters]” (Pearson and Stevens, 1994: 23). This approach tends to focus on the teaching and practice of the skills believed to be the necessary requirements for early literacy and language development

(Bloch, 2005). These de-contextualised skills are taught to children from part to whole with a heavy concentration on encoding and decoding skills, focusing on the vowel and alphabet system, phonics, letter and word recognition, blending of words, sound patterns and so on. In contrast, Freebody and Luke (1990) identified four roles for the reader: text decoder, text participant, text user and text analyst. The basic skills approach focuses just on decoding skills, leaving learners at a loss when it comes to meaningfully using varieties of texts for real purposes, including subject-based learning.

Prinsloo and Stein (2004: 68) argue that the cognitivist approach to teaching early literacy draws heavily on behaviourist notions of literacy teaching based on the assumption that learners should be taught to read and write by way of learning a sequence of component technical skills to do with the coding and decoding of print. De-contextualised skills like these - with much concentration on phonics; formation of words from component units; alphabetisation skills and the identification of syllables - are often transmitted to children in school settings. The argument made by McGuinness (1998), below, is indicative of a behaviourist approach to the teaching of literacy:

Reading is a skilled behaviour and like all skills, it has to be taught from the bottom-up, from simple parts to the complex whole. No one would dream of asking a novice diver to attempt a difficult dive like a jack knife. No one would like to teach a beginning piano student to use all the ten fingers at the first lesson. All skilled learning builds piece by piece until the skills are integrated (McGuinness, 1998, quoted in Hannon, 2000: 93).

This notion is deeply ingrained in educational institutions, especially in Africa (e.g. Lankshear, and Knobel, 2006) where curriculum planners and educators believe that such activities



constitute literacy learning. They mistakenly attribute the lack of such literacy skills to insufficient instruction or to a cognitive deficiency (Street, 2005).

Behaviourist learning theory, associated with the work of Skinner, drew from studies of animal behaviours where animals learn to perform certain tasks in response to stimuli (or punishment and reward). According to Garton and Pratt (1998:13), Skinner's view was that

behaviour once reinforced, would continue particularly after further reinforcement. Desirable behaviour could be systematically reinforced, while undesirable behaviour could be extinguished through the removal of reinforcement. Such changes in behaviour constituted learning.

Like proponents of the 'autonomous' view of literacy, Olson and Torrance (2001: 8) further argue that the behaviourist learning theory saw the text as something to be decoded. They contend that

[l]earning to read and write was a matter of teaching a code, letters and sounds by means of which one could consider first syllables, then words and finally utterances. Only then one could be concerned with meanings.

Behaviourists (Tompkins 2010) believed that children should be introduced to alphabetisation, letter formation, and phonics instruction first before extracting meaning from texts. Another tenet of behaviourist theory is that parents and educators "provide a language model that children learn through imitation" (Morrow, 1990: 90). The acquisition of this model is enhanced and encouraged through positive stimuli. The behaviourist approach to teaching is (still) inherently implicated within educational institutions, leading researchers, curriculum planners and educators to conceptualise the acquisition of literacy as a set of distinct cognitive skills such as letter-recognition, blending of letters, which could

be taught and acquired by children in sequence (Garton and Pratt, 1998: 17). The Cognitive and Behaviourist views are rooted within the South African curriculum statements (DoE, 2008). The example below validates the point in regard:

What are the five components of teaching reading?

Most reading experts agree that there are five main components to the teaching of reading. These are:-

Component 1: Phonemic awareness

Component 2: Word recognition – sight words and phonics

Component 3: Comprehension

Component 4: Vocabulary

Component 5: Fluency

Each of these components needs to be taught explicitly and practiced in context on a daily basis (DoE, 2008b: 11)

With this in mind the majority of educators in South Africa, especially in under-resourced schools, believe that learners should acquire these basic skills in order to achieve competency in reading and writing activities (Bloch, 2000).

For Cooper (2000: 179) the focus on phonics is essential for literacy success in that it helps children to “develop the awareness of sounds in words” as well as the ability to combine words together to form sounds. However, an overemphasis on phonics instruction and teaching children to chorus out sounds is problematic, in that it drags the learner into the intricacies of language outside any meaningful context. As Edelsky (1991:115) further notes, “the activity of performing divisible sub-skills may have little or no relation to the indivisible activity we call reading”. For example, teaching conventional letters, discrete skills and phonics to South African children, especially those who come from relatively print-free environments, often does not work (Du Plessis et al., 2003). These children come to school

poorly prepared for classroom learning, or have limited knowledge about print materials and the importance of reading and writing for various reasons.

Therefore, being immersed in classrooms where educators put most emphasis simply on coding activities, grammar, vocabulary, and reading fluency, is an approach that does not introduce children to reading and writing as communicative practices. This is in contrast with their counterparts<sup>1</sup> in well-resourced schools where children already have a range of home background knowledge which helps them to make use of the routines learnt in school. Gee (2000: 205) describes this form of teaching as a “skill-and-drill, back-to-basics [and] test-them-till they-drop” approach. Bloch (2005: 7) likens this learning process of meaningless repetitive skills to

[!]earning to ride a bicycle: being taught what all parts of the bicycle are, and how to move your legs in pedalling motion etc. will not actually get you riding. Nor will you have any idea what a bicycle is for or what part pedalling plays unless you have seen people riding a bicycle or have been on the back of the bicycle and decide for yourself that riding a bicycle is a useful thing to do.

Barton (1994: 149) points out that the autonomous approach to the teaching of literacy is deeply entrenched within dominant social structures in Western societies and linked to job market concerns about ‘literacy levels’. He argues that educators should instead take an

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<sup>1</sup> Middle-class English children or those enrolled in English-medium schools usually come from homes where their parents spend considerable time with them orienting them to reading and writing as communicative practices. The majority of African children enrolled in rural and township schools, however, begin kindergarten or Grade 1 with limited exposure to reading and writing skills or a lack of awareness of the role that literacy plays in their everyday lives. To add insult to injury, these children only receive home-language instruction from Grade One to Three and by poorly-trained educators and placed in overcrowded classroom where it is rare for them to receive individual attention. They also have limited reading resources. These aspects restrict the children’s literacy development, making it unlikely for them to succeed in secondary school.

ecological view of literacy, meaning that they should view literacy within a socio-cultural context and recognise the language and literacy practices that children bring to classroom settings (their 'funds of knowledge') from their families and communities, rather than treating them as empty boxes waiting to be filled. For him, children have different perceptions about literacy, in that their understandings and knowledge about literacy depend on the different encounters they have had with literacy in different social or cultural contexts. Along these lines, Du Plessis et al. (2003) found that South African working class Black children have considerable knowledge of art and design activities, and that educators could usefully incorporate this knowledge in their lessons, by way of developing an approach to reading and writing that has a greater creative dimension than is commonly the case. Along similar lines, and in contrast with the autonomous model of literacy, Street (1984, 2005) advocates an 'ideological' model of literacy. The 'ideological' model of literacy acknowledges and values the environment within which the child has grown up and developed. It works from the assumption that literacy is contextual, in that it is deeply embedded within social structures and within dominant ideologies. The emphasis within this model is primarily on what people can do with literacy in social and cultural contexts rather than on what literacy does to them (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Early literacy educators should encourage learners to participate in activities that require them to engage in spoken and print-based conversations and interactions. While the emphasis is on doing meaningful literacy activities, the educators should pay attention to the knowledge brought by the children into the classroom so that they may be able to extend it and use it within and beyond the activities related to the classroom. Their aim should be to help children

understand the purpose of these activities, and how to do them while they also develop their ability to engage in ways that the school favours as school-based learning. Early literacy programmes, therefore, should not only focus on the acquisition of reading and writing skills, but also on the construction of meaning and on the activities which give meaning to particular ways of reading and writing. As Gee (1996: 2) points out, “reading [involves] reading something with understanding”. Teaching reading and writing as de-contextualised sets of skills is not helpful for children who come from poor backgrounds where they have minimal or no access to print materials, and where parents engage in limited literacy practices.

Gee argues that one never learns simply to read and write but learns this skill within certain discourses. He makes a distinction between the idea of Discourse (with a capital ‘D’), which involves more than everyday conversational language, and discourse with a small ‘d’ to connote simply the language part of communicative practice. He further defines Discourse(s) as those “socioculturally determined ways of thinking, feeling, valuing and using language in different contexts” that people draw in social activity (Gee, 1990: 150). Gee’s Discourse theory presents a sociolinguistic perspective that is premised on the notion that a person (or a child) acquires a Primary Discourse along with their first uses of language. Primary Discourses are the types of Discourses through which people are apprenticed and socialised within their socio-cultural contexts. Primary Discourses form the basis of the acquisition and learning of Secondary Discourses (Discourses associated with dominant or educational institutions). In accord with Street’s (1984) ‘ideological’ model of literacy, Gee’s

theory insists that Discourses are ideological in nature because they are inherently related to the dominant institutions as well as to the cultural practices of a particular society (1996: 132). For Gee, children who are born into environments whose Primary Discourses are incompatible with the Secondary Discourses are believed to be at risk of reading failure. Those children, on the other hand, whose Primary Discourses are compatible with the predominant educational Discourses are potentially advantaged because the school Discourses are a consistent extension of the home or Primary Discourse. They feel at home in schools because schools relate to and extend the 'ways of knowing' which they already hold as family knowledge and community practices. Therefore early literacy educators, in fact, should, endorse these home-based Discourses (knowledge/language) even from marginal or non-mainstream communities, by creating an environment which will value the knowledge these children bring with them, and by creating bridges towards the Discourses that are valued by the institution.

The above information demonstrates that the dominant model of literacy presents many challenges for South Africa's education system (and Africa's in general) which continue to drill children in basic phonics, as if that is what constitutes literacy. The majority of children, especially those who come from impoverished communities, face reading difficulties, as evidenced in the reading tests of PIRLS and others described earlier. Further, they come from disadvantaged environments where there are no school and public libraries that will encourage them to read. Many of their parents reportedly do not spend much time with them orienting them into reading and writing activities as is the case with children from

middle-class backgrounds, or otherwise do it in ways that are not always successful (Stein and Slominsky, 2006). Thus, adopting a sociocultural approach to literacy in the classrooms might benefit educators in respect of their teaching practice. It is within the context of this information that researchers began to develop theories of early literacy learning. The emergent literacy approach which I discuss below promises a way forward, in contrast to the behaviourist influences of widespread 'reading readiness' concerns.

## **2.4 Early literacy developments**

The concept of 'reading readiness' and phonics-based instruction has dominated early literacy research as well as educational beliefs in South Africa (Gesell, 1925; Piaget, 1962; Gray, 1956; Adams, 1990). The 'reading readiness' paradigm views child maturation processes as important determiners of early literacy success (Gesell, 1925). This paradigm centres on the notion that formal early literacy instruction should be delayed until a child has reached a certain level of maturity and that early exposure to print-based work, except having stories read to them, is potentially harmful for the child (Morphett & Washburne, 1931). Difficulties with reading and writing, according to this approach, are sometimes a direct result of premature instruction combined with an inappropriate level of neural maturity. Morphett and Washburne (1931) concluded that a mental age of six years and six months was a requirement for the commencement of the learning of reading and writing skills. Along such lines, later 'reading readiness' approaches identified pre-reading activities

such as visual and auditory discrimination exercises,<sup>2</sup> as appropriate activities for pre-school children. For Morrow (1990: 9), ‘reading readiness’ programmes are teacher-centred in that they place much emphasis on “direct instruction”. They also focus on the educators’ responsibility as fountains of knowledge needed for early literacy learning, assuming that “all children are at a fairly similar level of development when they come to preschool [or school]” (Morrow, 1990: 9). What this approach fails to consider is that some children come to pre/school better prepared for classroom discourse. Prinsloo and Bloch (1999) maintain that this notion dominates the South Africa’s education system and is lodged within the minds of many South African school educators who believe that it is a perfect model for effective instruction. Although some of the skills related to the ‘reading readiness’ perspective are essential for early literacy development, new research has extended our way of thinking regarding how children should learn, as I go on to discuss below.

## **2.5 New contributions**

From the 1960s and onwards, in the USA, UK and elsewhere, new ideas regarding the acquisition of oral and written language and emergent reading behaviours began to emerge (Hunt, 1966; Clay, 1966; Teale and Sulzy, 1986). This new information challenged the ‘reading readiness’ paradigm which thought of literacy-related skills (reading, writing and oral language development) as separate and independent of one another. Marie Clay (1966) and other researchers introduced the term *emergent literacy* to explain the emerging behaviours

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<sup>2</sup> Auditory and visual discrimination programmes focus on the association of sounds with letters such matching words with pictures. Other examples include letter-formation, rhyming words, spelling, colour recognition and matching pictures that begin with certain letters.



of young children engaged in scribble writing and pretend reading (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Whereas the 'reading readiness' perspective suggests that a child should reach a certain age before learning to write or read in order to acquire a solid foundation of reading and writing skills, *emergent literacy* suggests that early literacy learning begins prior to entering school and that it is a continuous process. For example, at age two, three and four years, children already have a preliminary to good command of language, having grasped key aspects of its grammatical features and linguistic components. At these ages children can often identify signs and labels, and have also been exposed to written language practices. They sometimes imitate reading and writing activities, though these are not usually conventional and are commonly described as 'play-reading' or 'play-writing' or 'pretend' activities. The *emergent literacy* perspective also maintains that oral language as well as reading and writing develop concurrently and inter-connectedly in early literacy development rather than as a series of discrete skills. This literacy development occurs in social, cultural and educational settings through the engagement of meaningful literacy activities or through social interaction with experienced adults. Therefore, children become literate by being constantly exposed to print-rich environments and by interacting with print themselves, sometimes together with adults who have more knowledge about printed materials. This approach encourages researchers to pay attention to the print-related writings that are exhibited in children's home environment, and whether these match or diverge from school-based learning.

The *emergent literacy* perspective draws upon, first, Piagetian and, later, Vygotskian theories of learning, to emphasise the systematic, creative and sociocultural nature of

literacy learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theories, as far as literacy learning is concerned, work from the assumption that cognitive development is dependent on the individual's interaction with his or her social and cultural environment. Vygotskian approaches diverge from Piagetian perspectives on 'learning stages' (for example, in the 'reading readiness' approach). Vygotsky perceived "maturation ... as a precondition of learning but never the result" (Vygotsky, 1978: 90-91). Vygotsky also perceived reading behaviours and written language as continuous processes and not simply as processes that begin when a child has reached a certain level of maturity. For him literacy learning takes place when the child interacts with more knowledgeable individuals within his or her existing environment. Vygotsky saw language as an important determiner for cognitive development and literacy learning. For example, children use language for communicative purposes as well as for expressing their identity and their sense of social place.

It is important, therefore, for educators to know what children use language for so that they can design activities that integrate a social dimension, such as having group discussions where children discuss literacy activities they are engaged in outside school contexts. Through this form of social interaction, Vygotskian-influenced theories of early childhood literacy learning maintain that the learning process is enhanced through 'scaffolding' and through learning in the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD)<sup>3</sup>. Scaffolding is a concept

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<sup>3</sup> The Zone of Proximal Development is the gap between what a child/learner can do in collaboration with more knowledgeable individuals and what he/she can do without assistance. Vygotsky developed the concept to critique the 'reading readiness' perspective which used standardised tests to measure children's intelligence. In his argument, Vygotsky states that rather than testing children's knowledge through standardised tests, it is

developed by Bruner (1967; see Pea, 2004), a support technique that educators or parents use to teach children. Vygotsky claims that children learn more easily with others than they do alone and that they follow this pattern and gradually develop the ability to do certain tasks independently. Scaffolding is apparent in storybook reading, where the educator might help learners to read a book they could not read independently, or to interpret a piece of writing or an advertisement.

Both *emergent literacy* and Vygotsky's theories are, therefore, valuable in helping curriculum planners as well as early literacy educators in devising teaching strategies that would enable young children to build a strong sense of early literacy base. Both these theories are also instrumental in helping educators to understand the power of recognising struggling young readers and writers in their classrooms, and in intervening in order to help them develop good literacy skills. They also emphasise the social and cultural environments where the process of literacy learning takes place. During the emergent literacy stage, individuals who are more knowledgeable transmit their cultural and social knowledge to the children (Teale, 1988). They also show children how to partake in socially structured activities involving the use of printed symbols (Teale and Sulzby, 1991). It becomes quite clear, then, that literacy knowledge cannot be separated from social and cultural contexts.

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rather worthwhile to examine whether they are able to analyse printed materials (or pieces of writing) independently or with the assistance of more knowledgeable adults (Vygotsky, 1978).

## 2.6 Implication of *emergent literacy* in South African education

The South Africa DoE (2002) recognised the importance of *emergent literacy* in the early years of the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3). It argued that the “classroom should be a place that celebrates, respects, and builds on what the learners already know” (DoE, 2002: 9). The Department also acknowledged that literacy knowledge begins prior to entering school, so that when children come to school they have already cultivated reading and writing skills in their cultural contexts as well as in their home language. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) viewed this form of early learning as an important determiner for early literacy success and for later academic success “because it begins with children’s emergent literacy, [and] it involves them in reading real books and writing for genuine purposes, and gives attentions to phonics” (DoE, 2002: 9). In contrast to these statements, many educators in South Africa appear to subscribe to the ‘reading readiness’ view that children should reach a certain level of physical and psychological development to be oriented to reading and writing activities. The following comment by an educator from a Model ‘C’ school<sup>4</sup> (quoted in Prinsloo and Bloch, 1999: 17) illustrates this point:

Each child as an individual develops at his/her own rate. Maturation cannot be accelerated. Reading/writing must not begin before true readiness is reached or untold damage may occur .

To exacerbate matters, educators have to deal with learners who have limited or no access to reading and writing practices or who are de-motivated from participating in meaningful literacy activities in their home or social backgrounds (Du Plessis et al.: 2003). Research

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<sup>4</sup> Model C Schools were previously known as Afrikaans and English-medium schools that were only reserved for white children during the apartheid era. However, since the inception of the democratically elected government, Black parents started sending their children to these schools. These schools are well-resourced as compared to Black schools in townships and rural areas.

(Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998) has shown that children who come from environments where there is limited access to language and to print-rich materials are at a higher risk of failing their subjects. Therefore, educators need to create a print-rich environment in their classrooms for these children to cultivate literacy development as well as emergent behaviours (Heath, 1983). In addition, learning is easily facilitated if it is written in both the learners' home language and in the target language.

International research on early childhood literacy (Dyson, 1985; Fereiro and Teberosky, 1985) found that many children, especially in Foundation Phase classes, have knowledge of print as well as print conventions. These studies further argue that children generate their own hypotheses about print and language that are essential for meaning making. For Prinsloo (2005), however, literacy theories may present problems when applied in Black schools where literacy is a scarce resource. He argues that emergent literacy theories “come from environments that are literacy rich and also reflect child-centred, ‘progressive education’ concerns of English-language educators in those more affluent settings” (2005: 10). In South Africa, and Africa in general, these theories become less applicable where children's access to print differs widely, according to their social backgrounds. The curriculum, on the other hand, does not stipulate how educators should teach. With these qualifications in mind, the thesis examines the literacy and language approaches educators employ in their Foundation Phase classrooms to aid the learning process.

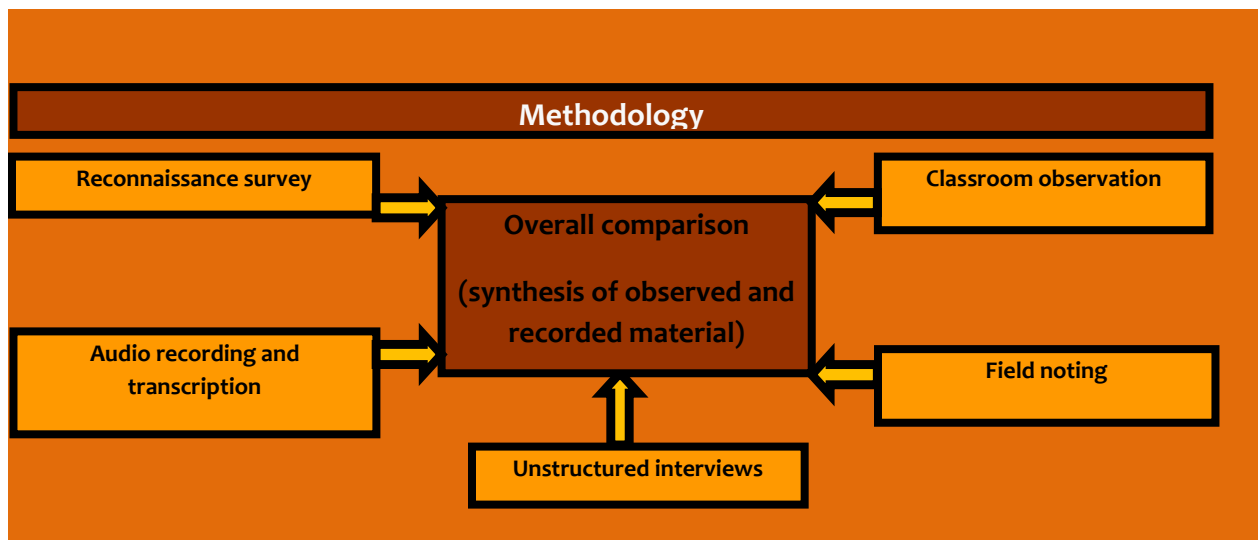
## **2.7 The influence of bilingual education on early literacy environments**

The use of home languages as media of instruction in schools (particularly in townships and rural schools) has created an environment where the learning of a language other than English, especially for Black people, is considered a disadvantage. It has been discovered that the majority of African-language speaking parents are in favour of English as a (LoLT) from kindergarten and onwards (De Klerk, 2000). These parents, who were previously discriminated against according to their languages during the apartheid era, perceive English as a passport to economic and social mobility (Mati, 2002). Because of this, many Black parents send their children to English-medium schools with the hope that they will receive quality education. With these qualifications in mind as regards how the arguments of emergent literacy perspectives might apply in the complex settings of South African primary schooling, I will outline the research approach adopted in this research to illuminate these concerns.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This thesis examines the perceptions educators hold about language issues and early literacy learning as well as the impact these perceptions have on children's learning when put into practice. To research these issues, strategies needed to be developed to access such information as well as educators' pedagogical discourse in Grade One classrooms. The broad research methodology followed is that of an ethnographic-style case study approach. This methodology is suitable for research on language and literacy issues education (Heath and Street, 2008: 122). It is commonly argued that the quality of a research study is reflected around issues of reliability, generalisability and validity (Heath and Street, 2008; Cohen et al., 2010). The reliability of this study, as of other ethnographic-style research, is reflected in the trustworthiness of the data presented (in Chapter 4) by way of 'thick descriptions' of the research context and the presentation of recorded data that was collected in that setting. The value of the research in terms of the early literacy-learning field rests on this researcher's ability to convince the reader of the 'telling' quality of the work presented in it. The figure below summarises the methods of data collection described in this chapter, following an ethnographic-style case study research approach.



This chapter provides an overview of the methods and techniques used to collect and analyse data presented in this thesis. The first section contains a description of the research design methods used, with the issues pertaining to the validity of this method. Then, an outline of the research context – the school, educators and learners – follows. The research goal, the statement of the problem as well as the data collection procedures will also be fore-grounded.

### 3.2 Research design and methodology

This research study examines the impact that educators' assumptions and values regarding language issues and early literacy learning have on children's classroom-based learning. While the study has selected one township primary school, its design was based on the assumption that the views educators hold about early literacy learning in this specific school might indicate, in exemplary form, the underlying practices and assumptions that primary school educators generally have about literacy and language learning in under-resourced



sub-elite schools in South Africa. An educational ethnographic-style case study research approach was deemed an appropriate approach for exploring social or educational phenomena in detail and on a limited scale (Cohen & Manion, 2010; Heath & Street, 2008). The ethnographic research approach originates from the discipline of anthropology where the researcher is required to immerse herself in an environment for a sustained period, so as to develop a detailed and informed understanding of the context. However, ethnography has also been adopted within the education field to study language and literacy-related issues and to contextualise them within their social and cultural setting. In the field of literacy education, scholars such as Barton (1994), Heath (1983), Prinsloo and Breier (1996), Prinsloo (2005), Scribner and Cole (1981) and Street (1983; 1993) have shown that ethnography is an important design method in gaining a proper understanding of the social and cultural nature of literacy in educational and home settings. It enables one to ask, “What is happening here?” (Heath and Street, 2008: 125), before imposing judgements based on preconceptions on an existing situation.

Ethnographies require the researcher to spend a sustained period in the field, observing, collecting and analysing or interpreting data and relating it to relevant theoretical frameworks (Green and Bloome, 1997; Heath and Street, 2008; Yin, 1994). Ethnographic studies enable an in-depth and close examination of a variety of resources ranging from transcribed data, documents, interviews as well as classroom observation. Heath and Street (2008) align ethnography to juggling as it involves a close examination of the participants examined, as well as reflection and the challenge of having to deal with more data. This

research design method has, however, been contested, according to Tellis (1997), for the fact that its findings are often subjective and not always relevant to all. It has also been heavily criticised for being an assemblage of anecdotes (Silverman, 2001). This criticism suggests that the researcher tends to focus on particular aspects of the research projects and ignores others that might be of particular importance to a study. Feagan et al. (1991) and Yin (1984), however, argue otherwise. They claim that a qualitative-ethnographic case study is a holistic and multi-perspective one; in that it enables researchers to understand a situation by way of unbiased detailed description and analysis, and that it also grants them much room to collect information. The term, “thick description” Geertz (1988) has been associated with ethnography. In Heath and Street (2008), Miles and Huberman argue that the ultimate goal of ethnography is to “make public the private and leaves the locals to take the consequences” (quoted in Street and Heath, 2008: 29). The aim of this research study is not to negatively expose the teaching practices employed by the educators but to document the manner in which these approaches were transmitted to learners and the effect they may have on children’s learning.

Another feature of ethnography is that of subjectivity or what Heath and Street term, “reflexivity”. Reflexivity to them “is a process by which ethnographers reveal their self-perceptions, methodological set-backs and mental states” (2008: 123) and this is usually a critique of ethnography. In this thesis, however, other features of ethnography have been included. For instance, the study was not a full ethnographic study in the school and neither was the researcher’s presence participatory. On a continuum from observation to

participation, it was strongly on the side of observation. However, Heath and Street's (2008) suggestion that ethnographers should always be flexible in that they should always be willing to learn when conducting observation, has been adhered to.

Heath and Street argue that an ethnographer intending to study the patterns of language and literacy use within a society needs to look at studies that have been conducted in the same field and understand how these studies have used the theories to support their own work. In this present study, the focus is on the manner in which educators use language and literacy knowledge to facilitate instruction and how learners respond to such teaching approaches. The researcher has looked both at literacy theories and at literacy studies conducted in township schools. These studies and theories have been of assistance in analysing the data collected in the field from the school.

Spindler and Hammond (2001) argue that educational ethnographic methods are participatory. Furthermore, they yield rich information that enables a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the context under investigation. It is for this reason that this study has used a qualitative-ethnographic method because it is the most suitable format for conducting school-based research. While this study is not an ethnographic study in the classic conception of such work in anthropology, an ethnographic-style case study approach, using the resources of ethnographic research in a more limited way, and focusing on particular concerns (such as on literacy and language) is a well established approach in

educational studies and in classroom-based language and literacy research (Heath and Street, 2008).

### **3.3 The research context**

The study selected a Cape Town township primary school as a case study. The school is situated within the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Case studies, according to Muthivhi (2008), are relevant for classroom observation as well as for the study of children's language development and acquisition as they enable the researcher to gain new insights about the phenomenon under investigation. The school where I carried out my research was an under-resourced school. Unlike many township and rural schools, however, characterised by dilapidated buildings, lack of sanitation, running water and electricity, the school, in fact, had access to all these resources. Nevertheless, it remains under-resourced in terms of library facilities and reading and writing resources. The children did not have text books. Educators had to design phonics reading books for their learners. The school grounds were fenced and there was a staffroom which contained an administration office, and principal and deputy principal's offices. The surrounding community among which the children live was largely working-class, and, according to the educators, most of the learners came from poverty-stricken homes. The school had a feeding scheme funded by the DoE.

The extensive failures of the school's learners in tests and examinations, including in the Foundation Phase, was the main reason why this school was chosen for the research. Other criteria that influenced selection including its accessibility for the researcher using public

transport and its existing relationship with the University of Cape Town, in that student-teachers had previously carried out teaching practice at this school before and had reported back on the problems arising from the educators' teaching methods. The classrooms observed were two Grade One classes and one Grade Three class. The area of focus in this study was initially Grade One, but the Grade Three class was observed opportunistically, since the Grade One educators were often absent for various reasons. A Grade One educator, Ms Ndlela, was regularly expected to combine the entire three Grade One classes and to teach these learners, a task she described as arduous. On other occasions, she left the learners alone without an educator being present. Some of the Grade One classes were overcrowded and educators confessed to finding it difficult to manage these classes and to attend to learners individually. Some educators used corporal punishment to discipline learners despite its prohibition in terms of the South African School's Act. In their discussion of early literacy in underdeveloped schools, Prinsloo and Stein (2004: 18) also discovered that corporal punishment was still executed and that educators justified its use as being "part of [their] culture".

The educators and the learners at the school shared a common language, isiXhosa, which was also the LOLT. Despite this, however, the use of English was often encouraged in classroom interactions and exchanges. The reason offered by educators was that they were preparing the learners for Grade 4, where English was the LOLT. However, educators also used a township variety of isiXhosa that included the use of English terms, to facilitate instruction, although the official language of instruction in the language policy was standard

isiXhosa. This feature of classroom discourse will be returned to later, in chapters four and five.

Data used in this thesis was drawn from field notes where I recorded my observations and thoughts and from audio recordings of classroom exchanges. The thesis focuses on the Foundation Phase, as it is quite clearly a critical stage in school-based early literacy and language development. Curriculum change and intervention programmes in South Africa put great focus on the high failure rates of Grade Twelve learners and on the Grade Twelve results as if this grade is the only one that matters. However, it is arguable that the real successes and failures start much earlier, in the Foundation Phase through to Grade Five. The bad performance of learners in tests in those Grades is cause for concern and needs focused attention if the problems with South African schooling are to be addressed. The research here thus investigates the pedagogical practices Primary School educators in order to find out why it is that learners perform badly in reading, writing and numeracy assessment exercises

### **3.4 Ethical issues: gaining access to the school**

I submitted a written statement, co-signed by my research supervisor, regarding the ethical concerns of my research to the School of Education at UCT, and was granted permission to proceed with the research as planned. I also obtained permission from the Principal and the Western Cape Education Department. Permission from those relevant authorities involved

my setting out clearly for them the purposes and procedures of my study. When I first arrived at the school, the principal conveyed to the school administrator that permission for the research was given, but requested that I liaise with the deputy principal, whom I briefed about the nature of the research study, its aims as well as the reasons for choosing that particular school as the subject of the study. The deputy principal was given the assurance that the names of the educators, the learners and the school would not be published without their consent. After this briefing I met with the schools Grade One teachers. Only two of them agreed to take part. They provided their informed consent and were given assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, as well as being assured of the right to withdraw from the research at any time, if they so wished.

### **3.5 Classroom observation**

The classroom observation commenced straight away on the first visit to the school. I sat at the back of each Grade One classroom as the teaching and learning process unfolded, and took field notes, which recorded my observations and thoughts around the learning, and teaching practices that I observed and the language specifics of the lessons. I paid particular attention to events where questions were asked, interactions took place and explanations given. Learner interactions, amongst themselves and with educators, as well as classroom teaching approaches were other phenomena that I paid attention to in the observations. I walked around the classroom only when the learners were engaged in individual and group activities, in order to observe what they were doing. This observation helped me gain a deepening understanding of the classroom culture as well as the difficulties encountered by

learners during classroom learning and teaching. It enabled me to select from my recorded data those events that I came to see as telling, as far as showing key dynamics underway, that I had come to see as central, typical or pivotal in classroom exchange and learning.

### **3.6 Recording and transcription of the data**

For recording purposes I used a small audio tape to intimidate and distract the learners and the educators as little as possible. The educators did not wish to be video-recorded or photographed. I transcribed the audio-data myself and in the process developed a better understanding of the recorded data, from the time I spent on working with it. The files were transcribed as soon after their recording as was possible. The quality of the audio-recordings was sometimes a problem, when the recording environment was particularly noisy. Background and ambient noise created problems on occasion as it was difficult to be sure what the learners and the educators were saying. I also paid attention to the visual and other data which became available during the classroom observation phase.

### **3.7 Challenges**

Educators were often absent from school, especially on Mondays. In such cases, one educator had to combine the Grade One classes and this often created problems as it was difficult to for the educator to teach and for me to observe a huge and often disorganised class. At times, the educators asked that the recorder be switched off, but this response lessened as they got used to my presence. A further challenge was that the classroom-based research was conducted during the swine-flu outbreak and during the rainy season in



Cape Town. Public transport, on which I relied, was a scarce resource at the time. This meant that I was often late or soaked through when I arrived at the school. Although these challenges relate to the internal validity of the data collection phase, they did not, however, invalidate the findings, in that I persevered and found ways round these obstacles and difficulties.

University of Cape Town

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine Foundation Phase educators' understandings of early literacy learning and their perceptions regarding the LOLT in the Foundation Phase, in a Cape Town township primary school; and to determine the impact these ideas, when put into practice, had on children's learning. The educators' perceptions were sought to determine the extent to which they employed the LOLT in their Foundation Phase classes and the problems associated with the use of the LOLT to facilitate instruction. An attempt was also made to determine whether their perceptions paralleled their teaching/language practices as well as the language policy and C2005 of the DoE (2002). Chapter four focuses on the types of language uses and practices (such as code-mixing and code-meshing, chanting and chorusing) that learners were exposed to in classroom discourse. In this section, I will argue that while the DoE encourages bilingualism (isiXhosa and English) in the Foundation Phase classrooms, educators resort to a mixed and localised variety of English and isiXhosa to facilitate instruction that might not necessarily help children to do well in standardised tests but facilitates classroom communication.

### **4.2 Educators' viewpoints about the impact of the LOLT on early literacy learning**

The South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) requires that all Foundation Phase learners be initially taught in their home language and be slowly introduced to the English language so that they can achieve competency in both languages. Scholars in multilingual education (Bloch, 2000; Cummins, 2001; Skuttnab-Kangas, 1981; Krashen, 2003) also share

the same insights stipulated in the LiEP and identify personal, academic and cognitive benefits of home language instruction.

However, research within the field of NLS (Canagarajah, 1999; Gee, 1996; 2005; Michael-Luna and Canagarajah, 2007; Prinsloo, 2004), as well as the current study argues that mere instruction in the child's home language is not in and of itself an adequate approach to literacy teaching and learning. For example, Prinsloo (2004) and Prinsloo, and Stein (2008) have found that, based on ethnographic study of classroom discourse, an approach that is flexible with regard to the diverse language and literacy needs of learners is likely to be more productive than a directive approach that views languages in bilingual settings as separate and parallel systems and treats children as empty vessels.

Accordingly, the purpose of this section is not only to determine the extent to which Foundation Phase educators employ the learners' home language to facilitate instruction in their classrooms, but also the pedagogical approaches deployed in such instances. This section, thus, will explore educators' conceptualisation of the LOLT, and the language resources that they use when facilitating instruction. Educators' teaching practices will be examined, as will the nature of their language practices, in order to determine whether these match their conceptualisations of the LOLT. A discussion on how these conceptualisations and teaching practices impact on children's learning is also included.

The data used in the study emerged from Grade One, Grade Two and Grade Three classes. It was collected from Ms Zathu<sup>5</sup>, Ms Ndlela, the Misses Katembo and Vilo and Ms Bangani's, and Ms Vela's Foundation Phase classrooms. Before detailing the educators' beliefs regarding the LOLT, it is important to state that while the school offered isiXhosa as a LOLT, it also made use of both non-isiXhosa and isiXhosa-speaking assistant teachers, who were particularly visible on the frequent occasions when the teachers were absent or attending teacher workshops.

The educators interviewed claimed to be aware of the objectives of the mother tongue policy as stipulated in the Language in Education Policy. They claimed to have adopted a mother tongue approach, which encourages the use of the home language (isiXhosa) in the classroom. However, in practice, this was before the DoE's recommendations (DoE, 2010) that English should be used alongside the home language in the Foundation Phase. As a researcher, I discovered that in practice the Foundation Phase educators unofficially adopted English (alongside isiXhosa) as a LOLT to encourage bilingualism, as will be shown below.

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the educators, and learners have been changed for ethical reasons.

#### 4.2.1 Ms Zathu's viewpoints on the use of the (LOLT) for literacy learning

Like her learners, Ms Zathu is a native speaker of isiXhosa. She has been teaching for approximately five years. Her Grade One class, which contained 43 learners<sup>6</sup>, seemed to have a good relationship with her. Their communication was mainly in isiXhosa in and out of the classroom even though at times Ms Zathu blended isiXhosa and English. Ms Zathu expressed positive sentiments toward the use of isiXhosa as a LOLT; her reasoning being that it would help learners to actively contribute to their learning and to understand the subject matter easily, as it is was more accessible in their home language. Her other reason was that isiXhosa facilitates participation amongst learners and the flow of communication between the educator and the learner, especially when learners are required to express their ideas. While she was emphatic as to the importance of learners having a solid foundation in their home language, she also saw the need to introduce English unofficially alongside isiXhosa as a LOLT for initial literacy. Her persistence in using English as a teaching resource in her Grade One class was drawn from the practical realities learners encounter in their home environment. Her classroom practice was therefore consistent with the latest revised RNCS (DoE, 2010), which advocates the use of English alongside the home language as a LOLT, despite her sense that she was going against policy directives:

[W]e are required [by the DoE] to teach in isiXhosa ... [but] in the end we can't teach completely in isiXhosa because you hardly [hear someone saying], **amashumi amabini (meaning twenty-one)** outside [the school context] when speaking to the child. She/he [meaning the child] does not know twenty, fifteen, and seventeen in isiXhosa] so you must say: seventeen is 'ishumi elinesixhenxe' so they could also be familiar with the English numbers (Ms Zathu, a Grade One educator, translated from isiXhosa).

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<sup>6</sup> The classes in the Foundation Phase level were generally very large.

It can be clearly discerned from the excerpt that Ms Zathu's persistence in using English as a teaching resource in her Grade One class was a reflection of what learners encounter out of school. Prinsloo (2005) discovered that isiXhosa-speaking learners are exposed to English in their social contexts. This is usually through television and magazines. Ms Zathu also used English as an intervention tool in translating and interpreting difficult concepts in the learners' home language. This practice has been seen to have a positive influence on children's literacy and language learning by Brock-Utne et al. (2006) and Setati (1998 and 2006). The extract also shows that Ms Zathu is in favour of additive multi/bilingualism<sup>7</sup>, which is reflected in the RNCS (DoE, 2008; 2010), in that both isiXhosa and English should be valued in classroom contexts because in reality learners use English concepts in their daily conversations. This is reflected in the comments she made in the extract below:

I am doing this [teaching English] so that learners could get used to the way English number concepts work. So when I say, 'ten dibanisa (plus)', I don't say, 'ishumi dibanisa neshumi elinesihlanu (ten plus fifteen)'. I say 'ten dibanisa fifteen' because that is what we do [meaning that is how we talk to each other]. We must take from what they already know although we do it because you can see that even here in the classroom we have put [the English and Xhosa number concepts] on the wall ..., they are there (pointing on the number charts on the wall) you also see them every day. We count them and we learn them (Ms Zathu, Grade One educator).

The sentiments expressed above demonstrate that English was used as a LOLT and that educators moved freely between it and isiXhosa to explain certain English and isiXhosa concepts. The extract also suggests that in everyday, actual isiXhosa, English number terms are incorporated into isiXhosa sentences to facilitate communication. It became apparent during the classroom observation that Ms Zathu was using a mixed variety of English and

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<sup>7</sup> This is an approach which advocates the use of two or three languages in the classroom as media of instruction

isiXhosa when communicating with the learners. This was apparently a common trend in all the Foundation Phase classes as educators were prefixing and suffixing English words and numbers with isiXhosa morphemes. The extract also shows that Ms Zathu was not ‘speaking English’ when she incorporated these English terms in her daily conversation with the learners but that she used a colloquial ‘first language’ instruction to encourage additive bilingualism. Ms Zathu was also comfortable with her learners speaking isiXhosa but also being able to use English concepts and numbers.

Researchers of bilingual discourse have commonly referred to this type of linguistic interchange as *code switching* (Myers-Scotton 1993) based on the assumption that languages exist as boundaried systems that also allow some switching across systems. Patrick (2007), however, drawing on a social practices view of language that looks on language as variable resources rather than as boundaried systems, refers to this mixing of linguistic resources as *indigenous bilingualism*. According to Patrick, *indigenous bilingualism* occurs when the speakers of indigenous languages are exposed to the dominant language, and in South Africa the exposure is through television and radio. For Patrick (2007: 115-116), this results in

[b]ilingualism whereby the Indigenous speakers learn the dominant language rather than the other way around; and (2) patterns of language shift towards the dominant language – which can involve not only an increased use of the dominant language in various domains of use but dramatic vocabulary and grammatical changes in the Indigenous language.

Other educators like Ms Ndlela and Ms Bangani also shared Ms Zathu’s sentiments regarding the LOLT, namely that it helps with the facilitation of instruction and that it enables learners

to understand the subject matter easily and to participate fully in the learning and teaching discourse. Ms Bangani thought that the home language was an important instrument for personal identity and that it enabled her learners to get a clear sense of what her teaching was about and encouraged participation by learners. Her views are in harmony with the RNCS (DoE, 2003: 9), which suggests that a language is a “tool for thought and communication through which cultural diversity and social relations are expressed and constructed”.

Both the educators were vocal about introducing English in the Foundation Phase. Ms Ndlela’s reasons for introducing English in her class included, among others, preparing learners for Grade 4 since in this grade there is a gradual shift from the home language (isiXhosa) to English. By the time learners reached this grade, educators assume that they would have at least achieved a linguistic level of proficiency in English that would enable them to cope with learning from Grade 4 and beyond. Ms Bangani’s reason for introducing English in her Grade One classroom was that English is a leeway to socio-economic benefits:

English helps one to get employment but it is also important for the child to get a solid foundation in isiXhosa for cultural reasons. It’s difficult to get a job these days if you are not proficient in it. Again, if you are not proficient in English, it will be difficult to interact with English speakers. Therefore, it makes life easier for you (Ms Bangani, Grade One educator, field notes, 2009).

Ms Bangani emphasised that she used English for teaching purposes in her classroom and as an aid for understanding certain isiXhosa and English concepts:

I particularly use English to teach certain English concepts. For instance when teaching about **days of the week, months of the year** [and] **the weather forecast** ... I also teach them English so that they could talk to other people. (Ms Bangani, Grade One educator, field notes, 2009).



The views expressed above by the educators showed that the learners in these classes had an advantage in that their home language was recognised and appreciated while English was used as a supplementary subject in the teaching discourse, which is an important aspect for multilingualism. This feature of multilingualism became evident in Ms Bangani's Grade One classroom.

In the lesson recorded below, Ms Bangani combined three Grade One classes (hers, Ms Zathu's and Ms Ndlela's)<sup>8</sup>. Her learners were seated at their desks and Ms Zathu's and Ms Ndlela's learners were instructed to sit on the carpet. The lesson focused on the seasons of the year. What is important about the interchange is the manner in which Ms Zathu employed linguistic resources from English and isiXhosa to facilitate instruction. The English words are in bold so that the reader can see them more clearly.

#### Excerpt 1: a mixed variety of English and isiXhosa

Note: ʔ = very loud

1. T: Intwasahlobo bethunana lixesha lonyaka. Yintoni? (*Spring is the season of the year. What is it?* ʔ)
2. CL: Lixesha lonyaka (*It is the season of the year*).
3. T: Ngubani ongasixelela ukuba mangaphi amaxesha onyaka? (*Who can tell us how many seasons there are in a year?*)  
[The learners remain quiet.]  
**iiseason** ke ... Mangaphi amaxesha onyaka? (*How many seasons are there in a year?* ʔ)  
[The learners remain quiet.]  
**iiseason**. Mangaphi Bonga? Kha uqhajisele ukuba awuyazi. (*Seasons. How many [seasons are there in a year] Bonga? Guess if you don't know [the answer]*).
4. Bon: Ayifive. (*There are five*).
5. T: **Good!** Uthi mayifive. Uthini omnye? Mangaphi amaxesha, **iiseasons**? (*He says there are five. What does another person think? How many seasons [are there in a year]?*)  
[A learner lifts up a hand to be nominated.]  
**Yes?**
6. L2: One.
7. T: Uthi iyi-one. Kuqala zingaphi iintsuku zeveki? Zingaphi class? (*He says there is one. First how*

<sup>8</sup> Ms Zathu and Ms Ndlela were absent for the day due to health-related purposes.

- many days are there in a week? How many [seasons are there] class?)
8. Cl: Zisixhenxe. (They are seven.)
  9. T: Kha uzibize. (Name them.)
  10. Cl: (Chorus) lintsuku zeveki zisixhenxe kuphela. Januwari, Februwar-  
(There are only seven days in a week. January, Februar-)
  11. T: Hayi! Hayi! 7 (No! No! 7.)
  12. 2Ls: Monday, Tues.
  13. T: Hou! 7 (Stop). Kha 'sixeleele Sipho. (Tell us Sipho.)
  14. L3: lintsuku zonyaka zi- (The days of the year ar-)
  13. T: Zeveki Toto (Of the week my child). Kanene kungoMvulo ndilibele. Zibize. (By the way it's Monday. I forgot. Name them.)
  15. Sip: [Sipho remains quiet.]
  16. T: Zidays of the week. Kufuneka ndikhumshe? Zithini iidays of the week kanene?  
(It's the 'days of the week'. Should I speak English? What are the days of the week by?)
  17. L3: NguMvulo. (It is Monday.)  
[Ms Zathu ignores the learner.]
  18. T: [Mockingly] OoThemba abazazi iintsuku zeveki. (Themba (and others) do not know the days of the week.)
  19. L4: Zisixhenxe. (They are seven.)
  20. T: Zeziphi? Zisixhenxe ewe. Kha nibancede abazazi iintsuku zeveki.  
(What are they? Yes they are seven. Help them they do not know the days of the week.)
  21. L5: lintsuku zeveki zilishumi elinambini. Zisixhenxe. (The days of the week are twelve. Seven.)
  22. T: ... Kha ubancede Nandi. Iidays of the week. lintsuku zeveki. (... Help them Nandi. The days of week.)  
[Nandi does not respond.]
  23. L6: Miss?
  24. T: Kha ubaxeleele mntanam. (Tell them my child.)
  25. L6: NguMvulo, noLwesibini, noLwesithathu, Lwesine, Lwes'hlanu, Mqibelo, Cawe.  
(It's Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.)
  26. T: Niyaqala ukuyiva bantwana bam? (Is it your first time you are hearing this my children?)

What is interesting about the extract above is the manner in which Ms Bangani entrenches part of the local linguistic discourse (or the child's identity) within the teaching discourse. This practice is in conjunction with Gee's (1996, 2001) claim that accessible school literacy practices integrate the context within which the student lives, as well as the language and literacy practices. Before examining the above interchange in greater depth, it is worth mentioning that when I walked around Ms Bangani's classroom, the Grade One learners, especially the boys, were using a mixed variety of isiXhosa infused with a xhosalised or localised version of English. This was a common practice in all the observed Foundation

Phase classrooms, a practice referred to by Michael-Luna and Canagarajah (2008) as *code meshing*. *Code meshing* is a “social practice” by which the speaker deliberately uses both the local and linguistic discourses (which are isiXhosa and English in this case) in the academic teaching and learning discourse. In this school, educators unconsciously (or consciously) used this linguistic discourse during instruction as is reflected in above case.

Deurmert and Masinyana (2008) and Deurmert et al. (2008) found that isiXhosa speakers in their study used a hybrid mixture of isiXhosa and English *and sometimes Afrikaans* [italics my emphasis] in electronic media and cell phone communication (SMSs, Facebook, Twitter, Mxit). This form of language is a reflection of everyday language (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005), within the Xhosa community, a language practice which has also been integrated in Ms Bangani’s (and other educators’) learning and teaching discourse(s). In the above oral interchange, Ms Bangani blended English and isiXhosa and scaffolded learners’ literacy and language development, to negotiate meaning in English. In line 3, Ms Bangani incorporated English terms into isiXhosa sentences to facilitate the learners’ literacy and language development. This is evident in line 4 when Bonga responded in the same manner. The exchange was primarily in isiXhosa with English concepts being assimilated into the interaction. Ms Bangani repeated questions in isiXhosa (Lines 3 and 4) and encouraged learners to ‘guess’ if they did not know the answers. This stimulated and encouraged learners’ understanding and active participation in the learning event. Establishing such a learning process created a relaxed environment for the learners to respond easily without

fear of being reprimanded for providing incorrect responses, unlike in other classes where they were regularly reprimanded.

Yet again, the English used was not a standardised version but a xhosalised or localised variety of English with isiXhosa prefixes to harness the learners' attention. For example, in line 3, Ms Bangani xhosalised the English word, 'seasons' to 'iiseasons' and 'It is the days of the week' to '**Zi**days of the week' (line 7) probably to give it an African feel and to aid learners' understanding of the teaching discourse. We can also see that in line 7, Ms Bangani changed the question for no apparent reason but this multilingual framework also opened up a platform for the learners to respond in a xhosalised version of English (line 4) to Ms Bangani's isiXhosa original questions (line 3), '*How many seasons are there in a year?*' This suggests that learners also own this type of multilingual discourse as indicated in lines 3; 4, 6 and 12. In line 4 Ms Bangani quickly provided a positive reinforcement for the learner even though the response provided was incorrect. This reinforcement was followed by a challenging question which required the learners to think critically and either agree or disagree with Bonga: '*Good! Uthi mayifive. Uthini omnye? Mangaphi amaxesha, iiseasons? (He says there are five. What does another person think? How many seasons are there in a year?)*' This encouraged learners to respond easily. By using multilingual questioning in line 5, she sent a message to the learners that English is a language of interaction as we can see the English response in line 6, 'One'.

Ms Bangani's use of two linguistic discourses (in lines 3, 5 and 7) positively reinforced learner participation "and [learner] agency in language choice in [classroom oral] interaction" (Canagaraj, 2008: 64). In line 7, Ms Bangani changed the question to "How many days are there in a week?" for no apparent reason. The correct response which followed in line 8 was in isiXhosa, 'zisixhenxe' (they are seven), which shows the linguistic flexibility of the learners. This linguistic flexibility is also demonstrated in the responses provided in lines 10 and 12 even though they are incorrect. However, it is worth noting that the learners had difficulty differentiating between 'the seasons of the year' and 'the days of the week' as indicated in line 10 when they provided, 'Januwari, Februwar-' for 'days of the week'. The use of English concepts in Xhosa sentences or questions indicates that learners were familiar with this (xhosalised) English discourse but that they were not constantly oriented into these concepts on a daily basis. This was witnessed during the three months I spent in the school, namely, that the Foundation Phase learners were not constantly acquainted with the English language.

For Mati (2004:14), mixing two language is not necessarily a "bad practice" but the problem arises "from a linguistic point of view" as the child is disadvantaged cognitively and academically in the use of his home language as well as from the target language (which is English in this case). However, learners in the above case seemed to have a good grasp of Xhosa numbers as indicated in line 8, when they responded to question asked previously in line 7. Mati further points out that this problem is exacerbated by the fact that the status of English in township and rural schools "is unfortunately not matched by the quality of

teaching and learning in English by the teachers and their learners” (2002: 11) and this results in Black learners graduating from primary and secondary schools with limited linguistic and cognitive skills in the English language. Mati also noted that what could add to the problem is the fact that township learners have very little contact with the English language outside school contexts.

Pahl (2008), arguing from a NLS perspective, claims that the use of different languages within a teaching and learning discourse “is a useful metaphor that recognises multiple languages and literacies, taking on different oral and written language communities ...” (2008: 305). She refers to this linguistic discourse as “the ecological model of language and literacy”, an approach, which acknowledges the multiplicity of different literacies and language practices within a given environment (2008: 305). Therefore, adopting a multilingual and “multiliteracies framework” not only facilitates learning and instruction but it “takes us that much closer to meeting the contemporary literacy needs of our [learners]” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005: 91).

Research by Prinsloo (2004) of out-of-school and in-school emergent literacy and language practices has described, through ethnography, how isiXhosa-speaking children employ the available linguistic resources to construct and reconstruct identities and language in interaction through play. Contrary to Mati’s claim, Prinsloo found that Black children playing in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, were exposed to English and that they infused English terms into isiXhosa sentences. These terms and phrases went through morphological, phonological and

syntactic changes when integrated with isiXhosa sentences, as the children used available linguistic resources to flexibly negotiate meaning and to construct identities. In the above extract, the educator modelled spoken code meshing during classroom interaction to tap into learners' out-of-school knowledge. The learners also 'mimicked' or appropriated this type of linguistic behaviour through providing responses. This established a multilingual framework between the educator and the learners even though this localised version of English might affect learners' linguistic discourse in the end especially when they have to learn content subjects.

I now go on to focus on a different situation, an English-only medium lesson where two assistant teachers opted for an English-only approach, which they believed was a sure way to academic success. In this Grade Three class, English was used as a model of constructing identity and the teachers explained how they felt about the use of an English-only approach.

#### **4.3 Ms Katembo and Vilo's views about the LOLT: Grade Three English lesson**

Ms Katembo and Ms Vilo (pseudonyms) were two assistant teachers (ATs) who worked for a non-governmental organisation in Cape Town specialising in training ex-matriculants as literacy helpers. Both ATs were Kenyans and had Form Four qualifications, equivalent to the South African Senior Certificate. That week the ATs were substituting for Ms Bonga, who was absent for unspecified reasons. The ATs were frustrated at the idea of not knowing what to teach on that day and what exacerbated the problem was the fact that Ms Bonga's

learners could not speak English which, according to them, obstructed the learning and teaching process.

Ms Katembo and Ms Vilo thought that the introduction of spoken English in the Foundation Phase did not seem to produce learners with high levels of proficiency in the language. For these ATs, the Grade Three learners they were teaching did not meet the ‘threshold levels’ (Cummins, 1984) required to engage in meaningful interactions with native speakers of the English language. They attributed this problem to the use of isiXhosa as a medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase. They also expressed frustration at their not being able to converse with the students because they were unable to speak isiXhosa themselves. As a result, they blamed the South Africa’s Department of Education (DoE) for neglecting the effective teaching of English at an early stage (a keystone of the Language in Education Policy). The English-speaking assistant teacher had this to say:

These children [the Grade Three class] do not have a good command of English and they can’t express themselves in English. Life is difficult for us ... Where I come from children encounter English in kindergarten until they reach tertiary.... The South African education system is failing the children of Africa because English is a global language. How are they [the learners] going to communicate with the outside world if they do not understand English in the classroom? (Ms Katembo, field notes, 2009)

Their view was that the predominant use of isiXhosa in the Foundation Phase poses problems, both inside as well as outside the classroom. They saw English as carrying economic advantages<sup>9</sup> and a lack of English competency created barriers for the students

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<sup>9</sup> This refers to job opportunities and being able to communicate with the outside world.



that would prevent them from communicating with the outside world. They suggested that English is linked to upward socio-economic mobility and thus undermines the use of the vernacular in the classroom. Despite their complaints about the children, they themselves exhibited limited English competency and this was aggravated because they could not speak isiXhosa to aid with the facilitation of English instruction in the class. Probyn (2006) and Brock-Utne (2007) noted this to be a common problem in South Africa and Africa in general. What also created these problems, according to Mati (2001) is the absence of teacher training second languages (English) and this could debilitate the teaching and learning process. These problems, according to Kgobe (1999), have serious implications for the objectives of the language in education policy such as equal education, accessibility, redress and democracy.

However, it would also be unjust to be harsh to the two assistant teachers as the DoE has also admitted that the neglect of English at Foundational Phases is not helpful, hence the latest review of language policy, as described earlier. Their criticism of the system is not new; but what makes their case rather out of place is that they expected too much from these learners. Added to that, their own lack of local linguistic resources, i.e., their inability to speak and understand isiXhosa, made matters worse. If the ATs had good knowledge of the children's home language, they would be of more help in that code-meshing would apply, making English learning easier for students. This case can therefore be used a window to explore scenarios created by the new emphasis on English instruction.

The neglect of isiXhosa (or African languages generally) occurs also because of the increasing pressure from parents, who frequently send their children to English-medium schools (Heugh, 1995). Ms Zathu also shared the same thought. She further argued that parents want their children to be taught in English as they believe that English gives access to job opportunities. In agreement, Mufwene (2006) argues that the drive to learn English in African countries is due to its economic advantages. For him “[g]overnments are promoting the teaching of English not because Americans, Britons and Australians require this but because, among other things, they want to have citizens that can handle trade and diplomatic matters with these powerful partners in the dominant language” (116).

As true as this might be, it has been recognised that children need a great deal of scaffolding or support from their teachers if they are to say something in the second or target language as this will facilitate the process of learning and language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978), something which was lacking in Ms Katembo and Ms Vilo’s Grade Three English class, as will be shown below. Furthermore, unlike in Ms Bangani’s class where the learners were given the freedom to infuse their identities into the learning and teaching discourse, in Ms Katembo and Ms Vilo’s class the learners were socialised into different identity positions.

Even though these Foundation Phase learners were informally oriented into the English language, it was not done on a daily basis, as educators were often absent from their classes and were thus unable to conduct the teaching and learning discourse. In one class, the learners were forced to count in isiXhosa from 1-100 five times while the assistant teacher

kept on leaving the classroom and would come back to check if the learners were still following orders. Even though, as argued by Prinsloo (2004) these learners probably encounter English terms in their everyday, out-of-school environments, in most of their classes, these out-of-school resources were not activated or drawn upon to scaffold their emerging linguistic and bilingual proficiency. In classes where educators taught English, learners who did not possess an appropriate command of resources in English were ridiculed in front of the whole class, as indicated in the extract below.

#### **4.3.1 English language practices in Ms Katembo and Ms Vilo's Grade Three English class**

The following extract illustrates the high prestige attached to English language resources and the identity processes linked to this status. In order to prove that students were linguistically incompetent in English, Ms Katembo, the assistant teacher instructed a learner, Khaya to stand in front his classmates while she fired personal questions at him (in English) in quick succession. Khaya responded correctly in isiXhosa but the assistant teacher was frustrated by and irritated by his answers, despite their demonstrating that he had understood the question. Then, because Khaya's response was not what she needed to prove her argument, she called on another student, Sisipho, whom she believed could speak English on a communicatively competent level (despite her claim that the learners as a whole did not understand English). In this interchange, the assistant teacher apparently wanted to emphasise the importance of knowing English rather than concerning herself with the needs of the students who were 'not' proficient in English:

### Excerpt 3

1. AT: What is your name?<sup>10</sup>  
2. K: Igama lam nguKhaya. (*The student smiles and looks at me (the researcher) shyly*).  
3. AT: Where do you live?  
4. K: Ndihlala eNyanga. (I live in Nyanga).  
5. AT: Answer in English. How old are you?  
6. K: [Khaya opts not to respond because of embarrassment.] Can you see? [Directed at the researcher.]  
They can't respond in English. How do you expect them to pass if they can't answer in English? This one is clever. (She nominates another learner, a young girl that is sitting in front of the classroom.) She knows English very well. Come here (the learner stands up and the assistant teacher starts asking questions). What is your name?  
7. L: My name is Sisipho.  
8. AT: Where do you live?  
9. L: I live in Delft.  
10. AT: How old are you?  
11. L: I am eight years old.  
12. AT: Very good (seeming very satisfied). Can you see she speaks English better than the others? [Directed at the researcher.]

The above excerpt demonstrates the prestige attached to the English language, and the way in which learners were socialised into identity positions in relation to language resources. Learners who were viewed as possessing little knowledge of English were 'othered', considered linguistically defective and were recognised as 'outsiders' (Gee, 1999), whereas those who seemed to understand English received high praise. In line 6 Khaya was coerced into responding in English and at the very same time expected to assimilate the English language without any help from the assistant teacher. Furthermore, Khaya's 'limited' knowledge of (or incorrect manner of response in) English was rejected and he was made to believe that he was a failure because of his lack of English knowledge. At this reaction, Khaya took the criticism he received to heart and became silent, after first answering the questions in isiXhosa. Sisipho, on the other hand, was complemented because she "is clever"

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<sup>10</sup> Names of learners and educators have been changed for ethical reasons.

and “... knows English very well” (line 6), and as a result of this she was considered the cream of the crop in the classroom.

In Gee’s terms, it could be argued that Sisipho paid the ‘price’ needed to be paid by ‘newcomers’ in order to be positioned with an identity that is in harmony with the dominant English Discourse. Sisipho displayed a good use of the English language resources that one needs to be able to engage in discussions. Khaya (and other learners) were excluded because they did not meet the English requirements. The AT’s response, ‘Can you see?’ and ‘How do you expect them to pass if they can’t answer in English?’ illustrates this. It is apparent from the above case study that learners were assigned different identity positions based on their good use of the English language within the classroom discourse. Khaya used his language, isiXhosa, to gain entry into the dominant classroom discourse but his efforts were in vain despite the fact that he responded correctly. Instead, he was reminded in line 5 that he should use English. This may suggest that a good use and knowledge of the English language is an investment in the learner’s own social identity, an identity that is changing across space and time (Gee, 1999). Khaya and the learners who were interpreted as not conversant in English, however, were shunned. Unlike in Ms Bangani’s class where the learners’ primary discourse (isiXhosa and its local form) provided a leeway to the secondary discourse, in this class the primary discourse was seen as an impediment to successful competency in the secondary discourse.

In the above lesson, the AT wanted to place emphasis on the importance of knowing English rather than attending to the needs of the learners who were not competent in English. The existence of English was also reinforced at the expense of isiXhosa. To avoid this tension, MacKay (2007:17) suggests that the members (or educators) of the dominant Discourse (English) need to acknowledge and welcome the “linguistic and cultural diversity” of their learners, as was the case in Ms Bangani’s class, and to encourage the participation of learners in their classrooms.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EDUCATORS' IDEAS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF EARLY LITERACY AND TEACHING**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

As argued in Pahl and Rowsell (2005), pedagogical ideas about early literacy have a huge impact on learning and teaching. It is for this reason that this thesis examines educators' ideas about early literacy learning and teaching so as to determine if they were consistent with the teaching practices and to see the impact they had on children's learning. The chapter will also be looking at issues of learner agency to see how they are presented, enacted and restrained within the classroom contexts. While educators' literacy ideas may be consistent with the objectives of the RNCS, the data presented below show that literacy teaching practices were teacher-led and restrictive and learners in other classrooms were constructed into governable and passive beings, thus limiting positive learner agency.

#### **5.2 The literacy learning process: Ms Zathu's class**

Ms Zathu's learners were at liberty to move around the classroom, to check on their classmates' work progress and to consult the educator and fellow classmates if they needed any clarification on the subject matter. This freedom is evident in Ms Zathu's views about early literacy learning.

Learners can learn from each other and as a result I encourage them to talk to each other if they don't understand each other. Some of them are struggling and that is the reason I encourage them to work with each other (Ms Zathu, field notes, 2008).

The relative freedom given to learners created a non-threatening environment and this facilitated literacy learning even though the deficit model of learning was practiced, as learners were divided into academically behind, intermediate and advanced groups. Despite her endeavours to categorise learners into groups based on their cognitive and academic performance, Ms Zathu also acknowledged children's out-of-school's knowledge stating that 'as educators we should respect it and be patient with children especially when they are asking questions that might insignificant' (Ms Zathu, field notes, 2008). However, her views were not always consistent with her teaching practices, as the learner agent was not always manifested in them. What follows is an excerpt in which Ms Zathu engaged learners in an oral discourse.

The task for the learners was to tell Ms Zathu what the date was for that day. The main purpose of the oral activity, according to Ms Zathu, was to engage learners and to stimulate discussion. Ms Zathu realised as she was walking around the class that some learners copied the wrong date into their workbooks from the board:

#### Excerpt 4

1. **Ms Zathu:** Abanye abayitshintshanga idate ezincwadini zabo. Yintoni idate namhlanje?  
*What is the date today?*
2. **4Ls:** Yi four ka-Agasti 2009. *(It's the fourth of August.)*
3. **Teacher:** [Loudly.] Andiniva? *(Pardon?)*  
[The class becomes very noisy.]
4. **L1:** [Screaming above the noise.] Yi4 ka-Augasti ngo2009. *(It's the fourth of August.)*
5. **Ms Zathu:** [Shouting at L1] Sukundishawuta. Uthetha into engekho yapha. Ndakuqhwaba. Yi-4 idate namhlanje?  
*Don't shout at me. You speak nonsense. I'll smack you. Is it the fourth of August of August today?*
6. **Ls:** [Learners remain quiet.]
7. **Ms Zathu:** Ibiyintoni idate izolo? *(What was the date yesterday?)*
8. **L2:** Ibiyi-2 namhlanje yi-3. *(It was the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Today it's the 3<sup>rd</sup>).*



9. **Ms Zathu:** Ibiyi-3 izolo? (*Was is the 3<sup>rd</sup> yesterday?*)
10. **Ls:** [Learners remain quiet.]
11. **Ms Zathu:** Haa-a sanukuphosisa apha. (*No, don't lie.*)
12. **L:** Ibiyi-2 idate. (*It was the 2<sup>nd</sup>.*)
13. **Ms Zathu:** Oh ninyanisile yi4 ka-August. Ndinga inokuba yi-5 kutheni ndingxamile nje? (*Oh! You are right. It's the 4<sup>th</sup> of August. I thought it was the 5<sup>th</sup>. Why am I in such a hurry?*)
14. **L3:** Miss ikhona idate efowunini. (*Miss there's a date on the [cellular] phone.*)
15. **Ms Zathu:** Ewe ikhona idate efowunini. (*Yes there is a date on the [cellular] phone.*)
16. **L4:** Nakwekamamami ...  
(*And on my mother's [cell phone].*)
17. **L5:** Misi kutheni kubhalwe, 'Augusti' ezincwadini zethu?  
(*Miss why is 'Augusti'<sup>11</sup> written in our books?*)
18. **Ms Zathu:** Augusti? ... kanitheni ndibone iincwadi zenu zehomework?  
(*August? ... [L]et me see your homework books?*)  
[L5 showed Ms Zathu her book.]
19. **Teacher:** [Diverting from the main subject.] Ushiye amaphepha ayisix. Ndanditheni xa ushiye amaphepha ayisix. Kufuneka ubhale ntoni? (*You've left six blank pages. What must you write?*)  
[The child does not respond.]

The oral interaction in the excerpt is limited to providing responses the educator wants to elicit. In line 4, Ms Zathu did not accept the response provided by L1 (in line 4) because she thought that the date was the fifth (line 5). Another reason for her to reject the response could probably be the manner in which L1, who could not be criticised because the class was exceptionally noisy, responded. Despite this, Ms Zathu told L1 that she spoke 'nonsense' and that she would 'smack' her if she ever shouted at her again. In line 4, she repeated the same question asked in line 1 to ascertain the validity of L1's response. She repeated the question in line 7 but only one learner responded and she still rejected his answer. One would think that she would want to test the learners' critical thinking, however, several minutes later she realised that the learners were right and that the '5<sup>th</sup> of Augusti' that she had in mind was actually incorrect. However, because (in line 2) she has already presented herself as being strict by shouting at L1, this led the learners to not respond to her question (line 6). The

<sup>11</sup> The incorrect 'Augusti' (L5) refers to was written on the board on the previous day by an assistant teacher who substituted for Ms Zathu.

silence that ensued enabled her to realise that she was wrong (line 13) and that the four learners (including L1) were correct, and as a result this enabled both L4 and L5 to realise that their mothers' cell phones displayed the calendar. Even though she capitulated, she still exhibited a tight control over the classroom's literacy and teaching discourse. Instead of acknowledging these two learners' responses, she disregarded them and proceeded to the next question.

The degree of learner agency in the above oral interchange has also been restricted as it can be seen that the educator has established a hierarchy which made her appear like a fountain of knowledge. In lines 13 and line 14, L3 and L4 realised that their mothers' cell phones have calendars. Ms Zathu accepted the learners' out-of-school literacy knowledge but did not incorporate it in the classroom learning and teaching process. This shows that her teaching literacy discourse did not adequately support learner agency. This is also reflected in line 17 when L5 realised that the 'Augasti' they had copied from the board into their books was completely different from the English-isiXhosa one (Agasti). Rather than responding to the learner's question and valuing it, she deliberately changed the topic. As a result, the instrumental knowledge the learner brought into the classroom was subverted and ignored rather than used as an extension for learning.

Gee's (1999; 2001) Discourse theory provides valuable insights into successful literacy learning. He argues that successful literacy learning and teaching incorporates knowledge from the society within which the learner lives. In Ms Zathu's class this societal knowledge,

referred to by Lankshear and Knobel (2007) as ‘new literacies’ knowledge, was not activated as the learner tried to incorporate it within the classroom teaching discourse. ‘New literacies’ need to involve not only new technologies (such as cell phones, computers, play stations, etc.) but also ‘new ethos’. ‘New ethos’ is the idea that “new literacies are more participatory, collaborative, distributed” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2007: 9) and shared amongst individuals than are the school-based literacies that flow within one direction only (from the educator to the learners). These literacies cannot be disengaged from the social and cultural values of a given society because they gain social value (Gee, 1999). In the extract above, Ms Zathu ignored the ‘new’ literacy knowledge the learners brought into the classroom, knowledge that could have facilitated instruction on account of the fact that these learners are immersed in technologically-minded societies.

### **5.3 AN ARDUOUS TASK FOR LEARNERS**

#### **5.3.1 Sound the sounds right**

The teaching practices at the school revealed the different underlying ideas educators had about early literacy learning. In the Grade One Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills lessons that adopted an integrated approach to literacy knowledge, the teaching practices were found to be predominantly didactic in that there was a huge emphasis on pre-reading and pre-writing exercises believed by the educators to be the necessary requirements for early learning in Grade One. The excerpt below, a language learning activity, is taken from Ms Zathu’s Grade One classroom in which learners were required to read phonics from their

phonics ‘reading’<sup>12</sup> books while at the same time they were required to point at the words. Chanting and chorusing dominated in this oral reading activity. As a result, these practices failed to facilitate the process of language and literacy learning as the majority of the learners became confused, bored and yawned. The focus was on the ‘S’ sound and the lesson was characterised by a *Look and Say* approach:

**NOTE: T = Teacher; L = Learner(s), CL = Whole class**

**Excerpt 5: Ms Zathu’s class.**

1. **T:** ... [V]ala incwadi yakho [yezibalo] ukhuphe ‘uZonwabise’ wakho ... Vala umlomo wakho umamele utyhile kwisifundo sesibini. Ndilinde nizole ke. Masifundeni, ‘Isifundo sesibini’  
([C]lose your [numeracy] books and take out your ‘Zonwabise’ book. Be quiet and listen and open [your books] on Lesson 2. I’m waiting for you to be quiet. Lets read, ‘Lesson 2’.)
2. **Ls:** Isifundo sesibini. Iphepha lesibini (Lesson 2 page 2). Sa se si so su.
3. **T:** [Deafeningly] Iphi le nto uyifundayo? Ujonge phi Akhona? (Where are you reading? Where are you looking at Akhona?)
4. **Ls:** Sasa siso esi isisu. (Sasa this is the stomach.)  
Siso isisu esi Sasa. (This is the stomach Sasa.)  
Sisisu esi Sasa. (This is the stomach Sasa.)  
Sisi susa esi isusu. (Sister remove this stomach.)
5. **T:** Hayi hayi. Sanukufunda into engekho apha. Mamelani ke masivuleni iincwadi zethu Sonke. (No no. Don’t read a non-existence thing here. Listen now. Let us all open our books.)
6. **T:** OK ke mamela. Masityhileni Isifundo sesibini sonke... ‘Iphepha’. (OK listen. Let us all open on chapter two.)
7. **3Ls:** Iphepha lesibini. Isifundo sesibini. Sa se si so su. Chapter two. Sa se si so su.
8. **T:** Siyolatha mos? Masifundeni. (We are pointing [at the words], okay? Let’s read.)
9. **2Ls:** Sasa.
10. **T:** Masiqale kuS. (Let’s begin with S.)
11. **Ls:** SSSSSSSS.
12. **T:** Funda ke ngoku, ‘Sasa’. (Read now, ‘Sasa’.)
13. **Ls:** Sasa siso esi isusa. (Sasa this is the stomach).

The excerpt above provides an example of a typical phonics-centred reading exercise deemed to be appropriate for formal learning by the Foundation Phase educators. The

<sup>12</sup> Reading books were a scarce resource in this school. As a result, educators prepared their own reading materials.

lesson, which was heavily dependent on isiXhosa, emphasised the acquisition of procedural knowledge with no attempt by Ms Zathu to make the reading meaningful by explaining the reason or importance of teaching such sound patterns. Instead, the learners were initially introduced to the association of sounds with letters, which were later combined into syllables, words and meaningless sentences such as, 'Sister, remove this stomach', that created confusion for some learners who were unable to connect certain sounds with the groups of words and letters they were reading. Generally, the majority of the learners read without any understanding and were unable to read and associate the sounds with the words. One learner was observed reciting the words incorrectly while looking at the book. He also struggled to associate the sounds with the written words as he was pointing at the incorrect words. This problem is also reflected in 3, above, when Ms Zathu asked Akhona where she was reading. Like the majority of the class, Akhona appeared confused as she repeated after Ms Zathu. She uttered the words without pointing at them.

The lesson also illustrated the tight control educators had over the teaching discourse, with little opportunities created for the learners to participate in it. The emphasis on the above lesson was one of eliciting and imparting physical skills rather than involving learners in using written language meaningfully. While this phonics reading activity might have helped learners with the decoding of words or texts, it is also worth noting that reading goes beyond decoding skills (Tompkins, 2010), and that it involves reading for meaningful purposes. The lesson did not seem to have facilitated effective language learning as some learners recited the words (incorrectly) without looking in their books. Since the procedure

was to ‘Look and Say’, some learners pointed at the wrong words while saying them. What added to the problem was that Ms Zathu’s class was very large and she had to finish the lesson within a certain time frame. This made it difficult for her to give learners individual attention.

The example given below, which followed the lesson above, demonstrated the types of oral interactions educators and learners were engaged in on a daily basis. It also shows that even during storytelling, educators have a tendency to fine-tune the lessons for specific didactic purposes. The learners were seated at their desks, involved and noisy. Ms Zathu stood in front of the classroom and ordered the learners to be quiet as she was going to tell a story<sup>13</sup>, to be followed by questions based on it. The class suddenly became dead silent, which could suggest that the children enjoyed being read stories. Ms Zathu related the three-minute story orally to the class, but as she was relating it she placed a lot of emphasis on the ‘t’ sound so that the learners could identify the sound that was prevalent in the story:

#### Excerpt 6

1. T: Liphelile ngoku (*The story is finished.*)
2. Ls: Yhu! [an exclamation].
3. L1: Liyakhawulezisa ukuphela. (*It ends quickly.*)
4. T: Liyakhawulezisa ukuphela. Ngela xesha ubumamele ela bali lam, ndifuna uphakamise isandla undixelele okokubana sesiphi isandi osive kuthethwa ngaso kakhulu apha ebalini. *It ends quickly. (When you were listening to my story I want you to lift up your hand and identify the sound which was prevalent in the story. )*
5. L2: Miss?
6. T: [Ignoring the learner] Sesiphi? (*Which [sound] is it?*)
7. L3: Miss?
8. T: Sesiphi isandi Abongile? (*Which sound is it Abongile?*)
9. Ab: Sesetumato. (*It’s a tomato sound.*)
10. T: Uthi sisandi setumato. Sithini kanene isandi setumato? *She says it’s a tomato sound. By the*

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<sup>13</sup> Storytelling was a rare activity in the school. Learners were always drawn into phonics activities.

- way, what is the sound of a tomato?
11. L4: Igadi ibinkulu. (*The garden was big.*)
12. T: Hayi. Ndifuna isandi ngoku mntanam. (No.) *I want the sound now my child.*  
[A learner raises a hand to be nominated.]  
Sithini isandi setumato Olwethu? (Olwethu, *what is the tomato sound?*)  
[Olwethu does not respond.]  
Yhima. Ndifuna isandi setumato. Sithini? [ebhekisa ku-Aphelele]. Uthe uve isandi setumato.  
Wait. *I want the sound of a tomato. What does it say?* [Referring to Aphelele] *You said that you heard a tomato sound?*
13. L5: Miss
14. T: Sithini esi sandi? Sithi, 't, t, t, t'. T-o-t-o. [Ignoring L5.] *What is this sound? It says, 't, t, t, t'. T-o-t-o* [Stressing the t sound.] (*Toto also has this sound. What does this sound say?*)
15. Ls: t, t.
16. T: Andiva. (*I can't hear it.*)
17. Ls: t, t, t, t.
18. T&Ls: Ngu-t kabani? *It's the 't' of who* [meaning, of which word]?
19. Ls: Ngu-t ka-iteki. [Chorusing it in a rhythmic way] (*It's the t of takkie.*)
20. T: Ngubani? *What is it?*
21. Ls: Ngu-t ka-iteki. (*It's the t of takkie.*)
26. T: Masitsho. (*Let's say it.*)
27. Ls: t ka-iteki. (*T of takkie x3.*)

Learning in the above interchange moved from part to whole as concentration was greater on eliciting mechanical skills than on extracting the meaning communicated by the story as related by Ms Zathu. Ms Zathu wanted the learners to identify the main sound in the story (line 4). However, it is clear from the responses given by learners that they had no clue as to what a sound is. Abongile's incorrect response in line 9 is 'itumato – tomato'. Instead of rejecting Abongile's response, Ms Zathu accepted it and created a platform for learners to express their ideas. L4's response was 'igadi ibinkulu' (the garden was big) which could suggest that he was trying to convey the meaning of the story. The majority of learners remained silent while the rest became rowdy as Ms Zathu repeatedly asked the same question. After realising that the learners did not know the answer, she decided to provide the correct response herself, stressing the sound four times (line 14). What follows is the

chanting and chorusing of the ‘t’ sound by the learners. The lesson had less educator-learner interaction as it was restricted to eliciting the correct responses Ms Zathu wanted to hear. This is indicated in lines 14-27. In line 14, Ms. Zathu opted to provide the answer herself, which was, ‘t’, thereby ignoring L4 who was keen to give an answer. The ‘t’ sound was emphasised (and complemented by the clapping of hands in line 22) and drilled into the learners’ minds so many times. Learners were also required to learn the letter sound by rote when Ms Zathu copied it on the board so that they could see it and sound it out. Some of the learners paid no attention and began to write and draw on their desks.

The above lesson bears testimony to Ms Zathu’s beliefs that learners need first to master the sound system before moving to word and sentence construction. “The best way is to first teach the sounds such as *a, e, i, o, u* before teaching vowel consonant syllable combination and word recognition” (Ms Zathu, field notes, 2009). Prinsloo argues that classroom teaching literacy practices that place a huge value on skills-drills practices result in a “highly circumscribed version of literacy” (2004: 302). The above two lessons demonstrate that classroom literacy activities in the school are ways of simply socialising children into traditional school literacy discourse (Gee, 1999) that might not have any tangible significance for the learners’ lives. Teaching phonics was an integral activity at the school with a huge emphasis placed on correct pronunciation and neatness. This practice has also been recorded by Bloch (2002: 22) who noticed that early literacy educators believe that it is “normal” to teach language as a separate entity, “even though there is no meaning to a phonics exercise beyond it being an exercise”. For example, in the lessons above,



prominence was placed on the bits and pieces of the language rather than on the message behind the text and the story. Rather than making sense of the lesson, Ms Zathu focused on the mistakes committed by learners and used them as a tool of identifying their weaknesses:

Did you hear how they pronounced the ‘t’ sound? Some of them still have to come to grips with the correct pronunciation (Ms Zathu, field notes 2009).

This suggests that literacy and language learning in this class was a matter of skills practice and habit formation, as learners were required to identify individual letters, practice them and chorus them out together (in imitation of their educator). For Machet (2002), early language and literacy learning goes beyond reading and writing. It involves active participation of learners with individuals in the socialisation process within the context the child or learners is embedded. Bloch (2000) and Prinsloo and Stein (2004) agree with this view that emphasises that learners make sense of literacy events within the social contexts they are deeply rooted in. Ms Zathu’s actions were consistent with the phonics-based approach to literacy which views literacy as the learning of a sequence of context-independent skills. From a sociocultural perspective, however, it is important to view the problem of children’s struggles with early literacy learning from a broader perspective rather than define it narrowly as an isolated activity, one which centres on mechanical skills (Prinsloo and Stein, 2004).

Furthermore, stories and storytelling (especially in the home language) are powerful learning tools for language and early literacy development as they introduce the learner to the power of language. According to Bloch (2005), the reason stories are an effective tool

for language and literacy learning is because they unbolt the child's young mind while at the very same time creating spine-tingling images, as is done through play. Bloch further maintains that "fluent early readers demonstrate a good phonological awareness, meaning that they have a good understanding of how language fits together" (2005: 23). Therefore, the placing of much focus on phonics through storytelling (either in the first or second language), as was the case in Ms Zathu's classroom, is an arduous task and an ineffective approach to helping children to make sense of the language. The following section focuses on Ms Thanda's class where literacy pedagogy was limited to technical skills and on insistence of neat handwritten patterns.

### 5.3.2 Write sounds right

Writing in these Foundation Phase classes was an isolated form of activity which did not add meaning to the learners' lives. The following extract from Ms Thanda's writing lesson in a Grade One classroom, demonstrates how learners were assimilated into an understanding of what counts as *school* literacy (Heap, 1991: 128) in these Foundation Phase classes. The activity involved the teaching of the letter 'd' and was accompanied by learners copying down letters and words, filling in missing 'd' letters and tracing over 'd'. The word, which corresponded to the alphabet, was 'Idada – duck'. The learners were also required to colour in the picture of the duck, which is in the worksheets they were provided with. Below the picture of the duck there was a list of words that began with 'd'.

#### Excerpt 7

1. T: [Referring to the whole class.] Bhala igama lakho ubhale **nedate ukhale in**, ugqibezele aba-

**'d'... then** ukrwele ngaphantsi esa sandi [d]. Usoyenzile le nto?

*Write your name and the date and colour in, and [then] finish (meaning complete or fill in the missing letter 'd') and trace over that sound ['d']. [Speaking to a student.] Have you already done this thing [meaning phonics activity]?*

2. L: E-e (Yes).

3. T: Ndiyayiqonda ... [Modelling the reading of phonics to the learner] Dada uDodo lidada Kudala. (I understand. Duck.)

*Dodo [Dodo could be a child's nickname] it is old a long time ago...*

The main purpose of this lesson was to train children to master the mechanical skills of filling in missing letters, trace and copy them down, chorus together and colour in pictures. These technical skills were thought to be the necessary requirements for early literacy and language learning in these classes. For instance, Ms Thanda expressed the following, regarding the above lesson. Her views provide a sense of what might be seen as the fundamental belief about literacy and language learning in the school.

Look they are writing. So I felt that their work and their books are untidy as you can see it seems as if there was no care. I was introducing [letter] 'd'. So I started it this way. So this is a picture of a duck. They must [be able to] pronounce the word, 'idada' [duck] because they can't write. The next step now, do you understand? They trace here [meaning over the small 'd' letters]. Where there are dots they complete [meaning filling in the 'd' letters in the spaces] then here I write for them [the 'd' letters] so that they could see how they are written. Then here you [in this hand] you leave a gap [so that they could fill in the 'd' letter. So I am still going to continue with this letter on that [duck] hand until they master it .

One can construe from the opinions expressed above that learning was an isolated form of activity in this class, in that it starts from part to whole and that it is acquired from the educator who is treated as a source of knowledge. Learning how to write was also educator-led and directed because learning involves transferring knowledge from a knowledgeable educator to the learner. Correct letter formation, copying and tracing of letter was the main concern as it involved the mastering of the physical skills. The excerpt also indicates that

educators act as dispensers of knowledge as seen particularly when Ms Thanda confidently stated that the learners could not read or write. However, I noticed that, on the contrary, her learners produced neat handwritten patterns even though they copied them from the blackboard. Neatness was also greatly emphasised in the classroom as Ms Thanda clearly indicated that the learner's work was untidy. This showed that mistakes and untidiness were not celebrated and seen as a learning process and self-discovery. Prinsloo and Stein (2004) also discovered a similar situation in a Cape Town Khayelitsha isiXhosa-medium pre-school where learners were drilled on the learning of the English alphabet along with corresponding words (K for ikati - cat, m – imoto - car, etc). The point of focus on the lesson, according to Prinsloo and Stein was on getting children to recite together in a ritualised manner. In contrast, Gordon Wells (quoted in Bloch, 2005) suggested:

Knowledge cannot be transmitted. It has to be constructed afresh by the individual knower on the basis of what is already known and by means of strategies developed over the whole of that individual's life, both outside and inside the classroom.

In the lessons that have been presented above it is clear that Foundation Phase educators believe that children need to be first to be introduced to de-contextualised literacy skills that they believe to be crucial for academic reading and writing success. The children were not encouraged to bring in their out-of-school knowledge into the learning discourse. The educators did not realise that an over-concentration on mechanical skills can be of little benefit and overwhelming for children, for they forget that people do not use letters in isolation when communicating with each other. Carole Edelsky (1991: 69) refers to this breaking-up of language into simpler bits as a form of "skill in instructional nonsense"

approach to teaching. For example, line 4 (*Sisi susa esi isusu – Sister remove this stomach*) of Excerpt 4, above, illustrates this point.

Edelsky further argues that this form of literacy discourse makes life difficult for learners as they are introduced to the complexities of the language outside any meaningful context. For Edelsky, language is learned by means of ‘doing language’, as is science through ‘doing science’, meaning that learners should be involved in literacy and language acquisition through participating in meaningful activities. In the examples given above, literacy learning was educator-led and assumed to involve transferring knowledge from the teacher to the learners. In addition, literacy knowledge is about learning a set of physical skills that must be broken up into simpler parts.

Edelsky therefore supports a Whole Language approach, which stands in opposition to the skills method of teaching language and literacy. One of the most important tenets of the Whole Language approach is that language is *whole*, meaning it “simultaneously dips into phonology (or graphics and orthography), syntax, semantics, and pragmatics and that it is part of a Discourse (Gee 1986: 163) – an ‘identity kit’ including words, behaviour, values and so on. Therefore, one cannot teach the use of oral and written language as isolated entities without having to relate them to the context within which they get meaning. In the above examples, literacy learning was only a matter of ‘getting [the] sounds’ or the ‘words’ right and breaking language into simpler components. As Smith (1978) argues, we learn to read

by making sense of what we read<sup>14</sup> on paper. Therefore, “[i]f children ... encounter literacy without also developing the resources to make and take particular meaning from the activities of reading and writing, then they are receiving very little” Prinsloo (2005:13) What follows now is an examination of the classroom environments these children were in. Directing learners to reading activities, especially in a language they clearly understand, not only makes the learning process comprehensible but also helps the learner to use the language to argue creatively and, thereby, grow intellectually.

#### **5. 4 The classroom literacy environment**

The Department of Education has also seen the need and value of print within the classroom environment (NRCS, 2002). For Street (1995), the “writing on the wall” can present positive and negative messages about the LOLT. He further argues:

The organisation of the visual environment itself helps to construct and provide a model of the child’s relationship to language and to the written word. The walls of the classroom become the walls of the world (1995: 121).

Research studies in South Africa (Bloch, 2000, Plüddeman, 2000) characterised rural and township schools as print-free learning environments. For example, Bloch (2005: 25) claims that “little [is] displayed or in use” in these Foundation Phase classrooms. However, this study proved otherwise, as it discovered an abundance of print displayed on the classroom walls. In all the classes, the educational and life skills charts that were displayed on the walls were written in the learners’ language, isiXhosa. Little in print was written in English, which

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<sup>14</sup> The approaches that promote the creative construction of meaning are emergent literacy (Teale 1986) and whole language (Goodman 1986).

clearly showed that there was a high value attached to isiXhosa. The walls were decorated with commercially produced and hand-made charts showing alphabets and phonics patterns with corresponding letters of the alphabets written in this fashion: *a/apile*; *k/ikati*, *t/tata*, and so on. Other phonics patterns that prevailed in these classrooms were the vowels patterns: *a e i o u*. However, during the time I spent in the school as a researcher there was never an instance where learners were directed towards the posters on the wall. It could be argued that they were there for ornamental purposes only.

### **5.5 Numeracy lessons**

The numeracy lessons at the school demonstrated the educational significance of the home language in Foundation Phase classroom contexts. As mentioned earlier, numeracy lessons featured mostly in these Foundation Phase classes as compared with other areas of learning but space does not allow for an examination of all of them. As with the above lessons, numeracy lessons were identified as having aspects of didactic attributes and were characterised by whole class teaching. However, these attributes were positive in some ways in that they stimulated educator-learner interaction even though the engagement was narrow. Learners spoke only when they had to respond to the educators' questions that required one-word answers. The following excerpt, taken from a Grade One classroom, is typical. It demonstrates the kind of oral interchange educators and learners were engaged in on a daily basis.

The oral transaction is taken from Ms Vela's Grade One classroom. It involves Ms Vela drilling learners into a numeracy oral exercise written on the blackboard. The activity seemed like a means to silence the learners and keep them occupied while the educator left the class for 20 minutes after she instructed them to work on the arithmetic calculations. When she came back she realised that the majority of the learners had not attempted to work on the calculations and thus decided to do it with them as a whole class activity. In this interchange, the learners were asked to find different combinations of numbers that would add up to nine:

#### Excerpt 8

1. T: Sizakufuna amanani amabini xa uwadibanisile akunike u-9. (*We are going to look for numbers, which, when you have added them up, will give you nine.*)
2. L1: Ngu-five no-four. (*It's five and four.*)
3. T: Ngawaphi amanye amanani? (*What are the other numbers?*)
4. L2: Nguseven no-two. (*It's seven and two.*)
5. L1: Ngu-eight no-three. (*It's 8 and 3.*)
6. T: Ngu-eight no-one. (*It's 8 and 1.*)
7. L3: Udibanisa u-nine no-zero. (*You add nine and zero.*)
8. L4: Ngusix dibanisa three. (*Six is added to 3.*)  
[The bell rings]

The learners in the above interchange were involved in procedural and calculation activity (Setati, 1998). They were asked to find the arithmetic solutions only rather than to extend on their responses and thinking. In line 1, Ms Vela instructed the learners to find numbers that added up to nine. Only four learners (lines 2, 4, 7 and 8) were confident enough to respond to Ms Vela's questions. The rest of the class remained silent whilst some were scratching their heads and biting their fingernails.



Ms Vela's main focus was on getting the learners to give the correct responses and to master the mathematical procedures, as is pointed out in line 1 when she asked the learners to 'look for numbers' that would add up to nine. Learners who provided responses were not required to elaborate on these so that the rest of the class could be enlightened. What is interesting is that some learners displayed a good sense of mathematical conceptual strategies without any reliance on aids such as fingers or sticks. Some learners, on the other hand, were simply guessing. Ms Vela reacted receptively to the learners who offered correct responses, but ignored those with incorrect responses.

While the whole class was invited to participate in the formal calculation discourse through providing the responses Ms Vela wanted, they were not invited to hypothesise their own mathematical discourse and to justify their answers so that the whole class (especially learners who had difficulties with understanding the arithmetic calculations) could establish a good number sense. Instead, she restricted the learners' own use of the mathematical discourse without any attempt to ask how they calculated their correct or incorrect responses. However, there were instances where Ms Vela did pictorial representations (in the form of circles) of the given answers or arithmetic calculations on the board and this aided the learners' mathematical understanding. There were many occasions in this class, as well as in others, where teachers disregarded incorrect responses and learners were not given any opportunity to communicate mathematics conceptually. Instead, after the oral interaction, Ms Vela instructed them to copy down the solutions from the board, which was a common trend in all the Grade One classrooms.

Anghileri (2006: 132) believes that educators need to create platforms for learners “to talk about their [mathematical] strategies and to discuss those used by others”. Such opportunities will improve children’s mathematical understanding, especially if they are communicated through the learners’ home language. However, this certainly becomes a challenge for most educators who feel that the government keeps on introducing new curricula that they often find difficult to translate into practice. South African educators, especially in rural and township schools, are also products of the apartheid system, which promoted a restricted method of teaching (Mbelani, 2008). Educators often tend to teach in the ways they were taught Bantu Education despite later amendments made to the RNCS (2002), which proposes that South African educators move away from rote learning and teaching to learner-centred approaches and active participation by learners in classroom teaching. However, at Masakhane Primary School, Foundation Phase learners were hardly given any opportunities to experiment with isiXhosa through active participation in the classroom-teaching, except perhaps in Ms Bangani’s classroom. The example below, which slightly resembles the one above in terms of teaching, demonstrates the type of oral interactions educators and learners were engaged in on a daily basis. In this case, there was less interaction between educator and learners. The classroom environment was also not conducive to learning as the classroom environment was too loud, tense and nerve racking.

The learners were seated at their tables and Ms Thanda, the assistant teacher (AT) stood in front of the blackboard with a plastic cane<sup>15</sup> in hand to attract their attention. They were required to draw a number line and solve the arithmetic calculations on it, but the AT modelled the first calculation ( $3 + 2 =$ ) on the board after realising that, the learners had difficulties solving the problems on the number lines:

### Excerpt 9

**Note: Ms Thanda: AT**

1. **AT:** ... lisam zethu ziphela ku-five ... nhe? So umgca-mananai wethu uzakuqala kuzero uyokutsho kufive. [Piercingly.] (... Our [arithmetic] sums finishes with five ... isn't it? So our number line will start from zero to five.  
[She drew and numbered the numberline on the board.]  
Nankuya umgca wethu. Masibale. (Here's our line. Let's count. 'Zero'.)
2. **CL:** ['Count all' method in English.] Zero, one, two, three, four, five.
3. **AT:** Ingathi anigqibokutya umngqusho. Ingathi nilambile. Thetha. (It doesn't appear as if you have just finished eating a samp and mielies stew. It appears as if you are hungry. [sharply] Speak. )
4. **CL:** One. -
5. **AT:** Hampa. [Irritated.] Shut up!
6. **CL:** [The learners then proceed to count loudly in English.] Zero, one, two, three, four, n five.
7. **AT:** Yes. Masifundeni isam yethu. Ithini? Yes, let's read out our [first arithmetic] sum. What does it say?
8. **CL:** I-
9. **AT:** Ithi three dibanisa two. [Interjecting.] It says three plus two.
10. **CL:** Three dibanisa two. [Parroting.] Three plus two.
11. **AT:** Thetha! Speak!
12. **CL:** Three dibanisa two. Three plus two.
13. **AT:** Thetha! Speak !
14. **CL:** Three dibanisa two. (Three plus two.)
15. **AT:** Thetha! Speak!
16. **CL:** Three dibanisa two. [Stridently.] (Three plus two.)

Several issues emerge from the interchange above:

- The learners seemed not to have problems with the arithmetic calculation per se as most of them managed to solve them. However, they seemed to have trouble

<sup>15</sup> This was a cylindrical round pipe.

making sense of the number line because there were no instructions that guided them as to how they should approach the problems. They only came to understand the problem when Ms Thanda interpreted the problems orally in isiXhosa. Robertson (2009: 2) argues that written instructions, especially in the home language, are indispensable tools to “effective math instruction” as they enable learners to gain a clear understanding of what is expected of them and to become used to the written word. In the above example, it became clear that the absence of written instructions on the board restricted the learners’ ability to solve the math problems. The learners did not ask Ms Thanda to repeat the instructions for fear of being shouted at, as it was a common feature in all the Foundation Phase classrooms.

- The lesson had aspects of educator-led attributes, in that Ms Thanda posed questions to achieve the answers she wanted to elicit, leaving little or no room for the learners to engage actively in meaningful interaction. Some learners replied silently to her responses probably because they were scared of being embarrassed in public. Learners were expected to recite responses that did not have any significance or relevance to their world. These responses seemed to serve the purpose of keeping the noise levels down and capturing learners’ attention. Some learners appeared not to follow what the assistant teacher was doing and just copied the other learners.
- The classroom environment was not conducive to learning in that the lesson was very loud, tense and nerve racking and this could have made it difficult for the learners to think creatively. Most of the learners seemed fearful and confused when Ms Thanda instructed them to speak. Some yawned, probably because they were tired of having

to monotonously chant the same response, ‘three plus two’<sup>16</sup>. Reys et al. (2007) advocates that the classroom be an “intellectually stimulating” milieu for learning mathematics as this enhances children’s critical thinking when solving problems. Some of the children plainly parroted along without displaying any knowledge of what was going on.

- The lesson above (and others in every Grade One classrooms observed) proceeded at a fast pace leaving behind those learners who were confused. This is clearly indicated in line 9 in the interchange, above, where Ms Thanda insisted that the learners recite the arithmetic calculation, and when they began, she immediately interrupted them and read it aloud herself. As this will be also indicated in the example below, the pace the students were working at made it difficult for them to follow the lesson because they had to listen to Ms Thanda and copy down notes from the board, with no time to think quickly.

The lesson above was teacher-led in that Ms Thanda acted as the “sole authority for right answers” (Reys et al., 2007: 17). She did not attempt to foster educator-learner interaction, which might have encouraged critical thinking. Learners were not asked questions that would lead them to correct their incorrect responses. Instead, the lesson was characterised by memorisation and the finding of correct responses. The interchange below, a continuation of the one above, demonstrates the rigid control educators had over the

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<sup>16</sup> Repeating the same answer was a practice common to all the Grade 1 classes.

classroom discourse. The oral interchange was restricted to chorusing together correct responses

### Excerpt 10

**NB: //** = Concurrently or overlapping

1. **AT:** Ok. Umgca-manani. Uzundimamele. Umgca-manani. Xa sithi three, ithetha ukuba izithuba zethu zingaphi? *The number-line. You must listen carefully ... [on] the number line when we say, 'three', how many integers do we have [to count on]?*
1. **L1:** Zintath- They are thr-
2. **AT:** Phakamisa [isandla sakho]. Xa sisithi 'three' kumgca-manani, ithetha izithuba zethu zingaphi? [Referring to L1.] *Raise [your hand!] ↗ (to the whole class) When we say, 'three' on the number line how many integers do we have [to count on the number line?] ↗.*
3. **2Ls:** Zinthathu. (Three.)
4. **AT:** Zintathu. Inani lethu lokuqala ngubani? (Three. What is our first number?)
5. **CL:** Ngu-three//ngufour//ngutwo. (It's three//it's four// it's two.)
6. **AT:** Nguthree. Thetha.! [Piercingly.] (It's three. Speak! )
7. **CL:** Nguthree. [High-pitched.] It's three.
8. **AT:** Loo nto ithetha izithuba zethu zingaphi? *Then how many integers do we have [to count on the number line?]*
9. **L4:** Hayi tshini ndiyeke. [Fighting with another learner.] *Leave me alone.*
10. **AT:** Kha uphume phandle. Phuma! Phuma! Phuma! ↗ Hamba! Hamba! Hamba! ↗ Mamela. Xa sisithi, 'three' izithuba zethu zingaphi? [Talking to L4.] *Get out! ↗Get out! ↗Get out! Get out! ↗[Dragging him by his school jersey out of the classroom.] Go! Go! Go! [Turning her attention to the whole class.] Listen! When we say, 'three' how many integers do we have?*
11. **CL:** Zintathu. They are three.
12. **AT:** Masizibale ... Let's count them [orally] ...
13. **CL:** Zero, one-
14. **AT:** Ha-a. Izithuba kuba siqala ngo-one. No . The integers... we should start counting from one.
15. **CL:** One, two, tree  
[AT demonstrated this on the number line by skip-counting from 1-3.]
16. **AT:** [Correcting the learners' pronunciation.] T-H-R-E-E. We have arrived at three, ok?)
17. **CL:** Yes.
18. **AT:** So sigqibile ngothree. Kula three simdibanisa nabani? So we are done with three. What do we add three with?
19. **CL:** Utwo. (Two.)
20. **AT:** Thetha! Nabani? Speak! ↗ With what? ↗
21. **CL:** Utwo. (Two.)
22. **AT:** Into ethetha ukuba izithuba zethu zingaphi? (Then how many integers do we have?).
23. **CL:** Ziyithree//ziyi-one. (They are three// they are one.) [ Some of the learners are yawning.]
24. **AT:** Zingaphi? (How many?)
25. **2Ls:** Zimbini. (They are two). [The children are dumb-founded.]
26. **AT:** Udibanisa utwo Monde. Izithuba zethu zingaphi klas? *You add two [with three] Monde. How many integers do we have class?*
27. **CL:** Zimbini. (Two.)
28. **AT:** Right. Masibale. One, two. Sukozela. Right let's count [She counts together with the class and demonstrates on the number line by skip counting from three to four.] One, two. Don't

sleep. [Talking to a yawning learner *and turning her attention to the class.*] So we found our integers.  
29. 2Ls: Yes Miss.

As in the lesson extract above, the AT used a procedural discourse in that the focus was on the mathematical steps the students had to follow to get to the solution. The learners were not encouraged to talk critically about the answers and they were not informed as to how the mathematical procedures/steps worked. Instead, the interaction was dominated by question-and-answer format and educators forcefully drilled learners into this kind of discourse, which limited their understanding of the procedures. For example, the first question in line 1, which reads, ‘... [on] the number line when we say, ‘three’ how many integers do we have [to count]?’ illustrates the point in this regard. When re-examining the learners’ responses, it is apparent, that they did not have much opportunity to justify their answers. They were restricted to one-word responses that did not stimulate critical engagement with the mathematical discourse.

Furthermore, as shown in the interchange above, learners demonstrated a good conceptual understanding of solving arithmetic calculations, as they were all able to find the solutions to the calculations but lacked the knowledge to communicate this arithmetic system on the number line. To make matters worse, Ms Thanda did not explain how arithmetic calculations function on number lines, and that these always start at zero so they should start counting from zero because one starts with nothing. Instead, she continued to ask unproductive questions such as ‘did you not do this with your teacher?’ that did not facilitate any

understanding. The educator's role, according to Vygotsky (1978), is conceptualised through scaffolding. In scaffolding teaching, a competent individual (educator or a parent) facilitates learner development and understanding. In the above interchange, the children's thinking was not stimulated or scaffolded. For example, the question Ms Thanda posed in line 1, '[w]hen we say three, how many integers do we have [to count on the number lines]?' left the majority of the learners confused. However, when one brave learner responded correctly, she lashed out at him by ordering him to raise his hand to be nominated. Instead of encouraging him to justify his answer, she ignored him and proceeded to repeat the very same question.

When teaching numeracy, according to Anghileri (2006: 2), educators need to move beyond the practice of "teaching written calculating procedures to involve both mental calculation and estimation as efficient processes", a resource that was completely ignored in the observed classrooms. In the above interchange, mathematics learning was like learning a set of perplexing and isolated facts that must be memorised rather than understood. The learners were not given a chance to reflect and explain their answers but were forced to provide the same correct responses. In lines 13-17, the Ms Thanda seemed to control the classroom rigidly. She instructed the learners to skip-count orally three integers on the number line but stopped them when they started counting from zero. At this moment, the learners were confused but tagged along when she insisted that they start counting from one. It would be immediately apparent to outsiders that Ms Thanda was wrong because when skip counting the first (positive) integer on the number line, counting starts from zero



because one starts out with nothing. If the learners start skip-counting from one it would mean that they have only hopped two distances on the number line (i.e. from 1-4). Therefore, the mathematical knowledge transmitted to the learners was misleading.

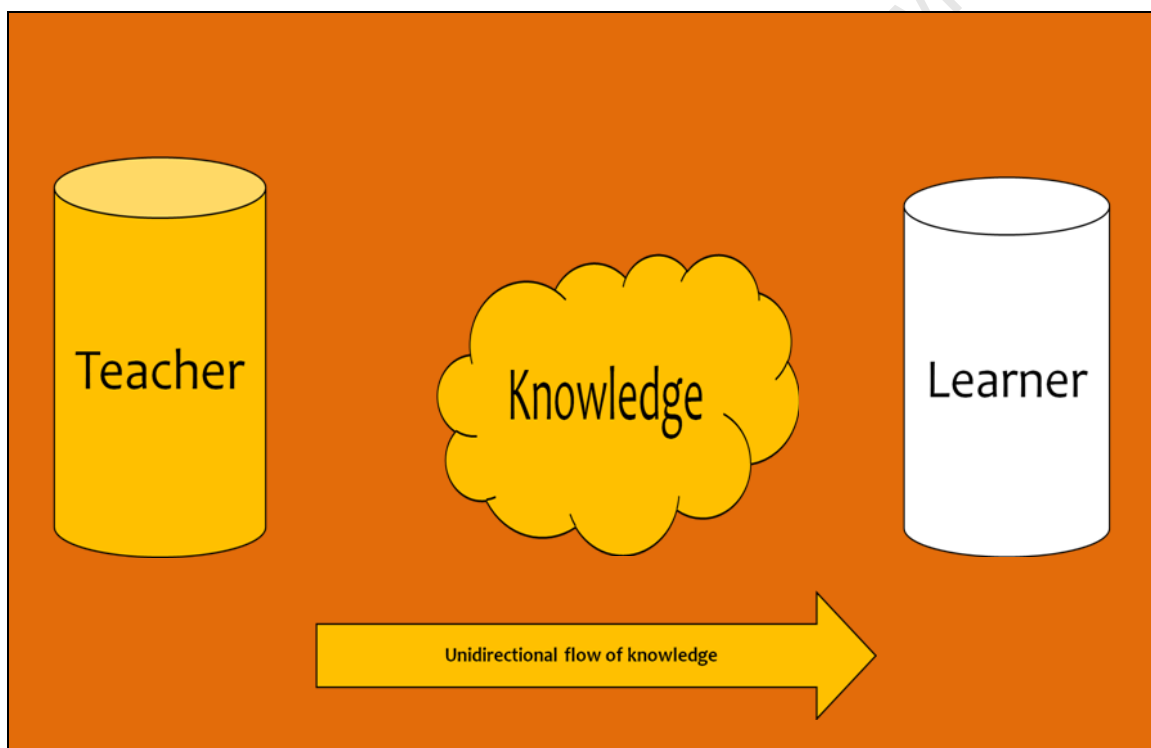
One could argue that learners in Ms Thanda's numeracy lessons were 'forced' to adapt. Learning for these Grade One learners was a conditioned *passive* response rather than one of understanding and they were hardly given opportunities to express themselves. They were coached to chorus out correct responses that would draw their attention and keep the noise level down. In lines 6 and 13, children who showed a lack of understanding or who provided incorrect responses were left alone to fend for themselves. Ignoring incorrect responses (as a means of alleviating abstract mathematical problems) was a general tendency in all the Foundation Phase classes. Children, who misbehaved, as indicated in line 11 above, were thrown out of the classroom rather than drawn back into the lesson.

Ms Thanda restrained learners from using isiXhosa cognitively by allowing them to engage actively in classroom discussions. Instead, the classrooms literacy discourse was characterised by a drill and memorisation that hampered any curiosity and creativity on the part of the learner, despite the privilege of having the home language as a LOLT. The FFLC requires "every [educator] in the Foundation Phase to teach Numeracy for at least 1 hour" (2008: 6) and 10 minutes of this hour should be reserved for "stimulating mental mathematics" through classroom discussion. Ms Thanda spent inordinate amounts of time

reprimanding students and focusing on one aspect rather than talking mathematical sense to the learners.

### 5.6 Summary of the lessons

The summary of the literacy learning process at Masakhane is presented in the figure below which shows that literacy learning was an isolated and difficult task for learners at the school, despite the fact it was mediated in the learners' home language:



*Figure 1: Linear approach to literacy learning flow chart*

The flow chart indicates that the early literacy knowledge transmitted to the learners at the school was asymmetrical, with no attempt by their educators to actively engage them in classroom discussions to stimulate their creativity. Educators acted as fountains of

knowledge while learners were required to sit down and passively imbibe this. For example, numeracy was treated more as a “catalogue of facts and procedures to be memorised” than as a “thinking process” (Anghileri 2006: 7) without any stimulation of classroom discussions. Children were conceived as ‘passive’ inheritors of knowledge rather than as ‘active’ agents who could generate their own hypothesis through participating in the learning discourse and making sense of the knowledge that was transmitted to them. This was also the case with reading and writing activities where the aim was that of transmitting technical skills deemed necessary for literacy learning. With that surplus of knowledge jammed in their minds, without any attempt by the educators to connect it to the learners’ home-based and school-based knowledge, it was easy for the learners to become overwhelmed by the scope of the content and resort to memorisation of information as well as noise making.

## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

This thesis described the purpose of the study and the problem being investigated. Several dominant factors related to teaching and learning practices and language issues were identified in classrooms observed. Educators were found to be having difficulties translating their literacy conceptualisations into practice and this at times hampered the literacy learning and teaching process. The “... upgrading and scaffolding of teachers’ conceptual knowledge and skills” (DoE, 2006: 3) to improve literacy and numeracy rates is currently a national concern.

Chapter two reviewed and analysed relevant ideas around the concepts of (early) literacy learning and teaching, and on language learning and teaching. These theoretical frameworks facilitated my understanding of literacy and language practices that might enhance cognitive and academic success in Foundation Phase classes. Furthermore, they have benefited my personal and professional growth as a researcher and have assisted me in developing an understanding of classroom observation.

Chapter three presented the research design methods as well as the data collection procedures that shaped the study. The results and discussion of the study were presented in chapters four and five. Although a small-scale study, these two chapters, however, revealed that there is often a disparity between educators’ literacy conceptualisations and teaching practices and this is due to educators’ de-contextualised and behaviouristic practices. These

teaching approaches did not seem to aid learners' academic and cognitive development despite the availability of the home language as a LoLT. The teaching practices cultivated rote learning and memorisation, failing to generate meaningful literacy learning activities that could have enhanced literacy and language development. Writing involved copying down and tracing phonics letters from the board, whilst reading did not involve any conversational transactions between the educators and learners. While there were oral activities that required children to engage in classroom discussions, learners were never encouraged to explain, justify or challenge their understandings of the subject matter. Instead, they were moulded into passive inheritors of early literacy knowledge.

Another salient feature in these Foundation Phase classrooms was code meshing. Code meshing created space for multiple linguistic resources that could have facilitate meaningful education in these classrooms. However, too much code meshing could hinder linguistic competency in the home language and in the target language. Code meshing is inconsistent with the notion that home language instruction is a leeway to academic success. Although not officially permitted, code meshing was found to be a helpful tool in bridging the linguistic gaps related to content transmission (especially oral classroom talk) although it might disadvantage learners in both isiXhosa and English in that the learner is denied access to the Standard English and isiXhosa. Furthermore, this linguistic resource could also be used in classes where English is taught as the LoLT as this will enhance children's language skills and cognitive development. Michael-Luna and Canagarajah (2007: 74) argue that if such multilingual linguistic resources are denied in classroom teaching, "we will not succeed in

giving voice to other ways of knowing”. In this study, code meshing was used to stimulate learner participation although not much critical thinking was encouraged.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

To improve early learning, curriculum development needs to address issues that are confounding early literacy classrooms through improving teacher professional development as well as the disjuncture between their ideas and enacted practices. Educators’ literacy ideas should also be monitored and streamlined. Furthermore, the curriculum needs to address socio-cultural understandings of early literacy in classroom environments. Therefore, the best contribution the DoE can make in ensuring effective literacy instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms is to also devote more attention to meaningful teacher training, one, which incorporates the socio-cultural understandings of early literacy.

Educators also confirmed into having difficulties translating the education curriculum into practice. One way of overcoming this is for the DoE to develop a curriculum, which clearly states how to explore language and literacy issues. This also involves stipulating how educators are to engage learners in meaningful learning to avoid serious pedagogical and learning issues that may cripple education. The aim of the study was not to tarnish the image of the school and of the educators but to reveal the type of teaching practices learners are exposed to in the Foundation Phase level. Also, it was conducted with the purpose informing future studies and intervention educational programmes design educational approaches that will improve early education especially in underprivileged schools.

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